The meaning of LOL: patterns of LOL deployment in YouTube comments

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1. Introduction

In his 2013 Ted talk, John McWhorter argued that LOL "does not mean laughing out loud anymore", and has "evolved into something that is much subtler", such as "a marker of empathy", "a marker of accommodation" (McWhorter: 2013). As true as it may be, and it is indeed true that the meaning of LOL is quite subtle and variable, this overlooks the fact that online and offline, laughing, loud or not, does not only mean expressing one's amusement. As studies focusing on face-to-face interaction have found out, laughing has many other discursive and social functions. For instance, in a study dating back to 1983, O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams have isolated five functions of laughter in conversation: marking turn-taking, instructing a hearer how an utterance is to be heard, evidencing how an utterance is heard, inviting elaboration of problematic turns, and accomplishing affiliation in conversation. Therefore, laughter in face to face conversation already *is* multifunctional. As a result, its online counterpart, LOL, may indeed have evolved, but its use was most probably never restricted to expressing one's amusement in the first place. In fact, a few studies have already shown that LOL is not always used to indicate a humorous response (Baron 2004, Markman 2013). In 2013, Kris M. Markman has more precisely explored the pragmatic functions of LOL in Instant Messenger Conversation. Her analysis of the functions of LOL is based on what she calls "patterns of lol deployment" in the dataset. This means that the functions of LOL are studied according to its position in the message. Interestingly enough, this correlation between function and position is taken as a given, and not specifically discussed in the paper. The aim of the present new study is then double: it explores the functions of LOL in a specific context (YouTube comments) and it examines the possible correlation between position and function of LOL. It only focuses on occurrences of LOL used as a discourse marker and does not take into account cases where LOL is used as a lexicalized word, in utterances such as verbal "I LOL'd". The hypothesis, derived from Markman's paper, is that the function of LOL largely depends on its position: clause-initial LOL is not used with the same functions as clause-final LOL or stand-alone LOL.

2. Data and methodology

The data for the study comes from the comment threads of three popular YouTube videos posted on the channel Miranda Sings. This channel has a very wide audience and 10 million subscribers and, what is even more important to study LOL, is specialized in humorous videos. The three videos in question are:
-Destroying Toys With As Seen On TV Knifes, 28th May 2017
-Why I'm In A Wheelchair Now, 29th September 2018
-Baby Shark! *Emotional*, 26th February 2019
The complete comment threads were saved on the 3rd of March 2019. They total more than twenty thousand comments (20 287) and 886 distinct occurrences of non-lexicalized LOL. The analysis of those occurrences is both quantitative, aimed at determining the proportions of each use and position, and qualitative. It examines the functions of LOL on two levels: the

linguistic level of word and sentence-meaning, and, maybe more importantly, the pragmatic level of social interaction.

LOL has frequently been studied in multi-turn interactions online or in texting. YouTube comments, on the contrary, typically consist in single-turn dyadic interactions: the turn is initiated by the video, and the user's comment constitutes the reception of it, which completes the turn. As a result, even though they "display the intrinsic features of interaction" (Dynel 2014: 38), YouTube comments can't display phenomena pertaining to interactional coordination, which is essentially what other studies are focused on. The present study then identifies functions of LOL in a different context, which complete the ones already identified in preceding research.
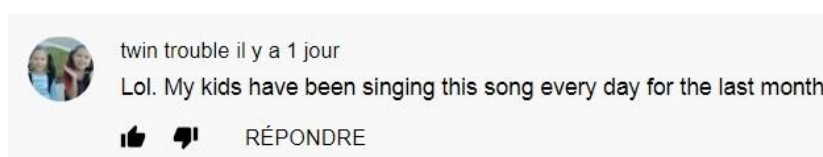
3. Syntactic position of LOL

As Garley, Slade and Terkourafi 2009, or again Markman 2013, have already shown, LOL is a "discourse marker" in the sense of Deborah Schiffrin, who defines it as a "sequentially dependent element that brackets units of talk" (2005: 57). It is therefore extra-sentential and, as such, its distribution is mostly limited to three possible positions. The first two positions are when LOL is used alongside a clause in a comment. In this case, it is either clause-initial or clause-final.

-clause-initial position (185/886 occurrences, about 21 % of all occurrences)

Clause-initial LOL is when LOL is located at the front, or on the left, of a clause:

It is clearly located outside the argument structure of the verb, sometimes by means of punctuation:

However, it is not necessarily located at the beginning of the comment. Nevertheless, as the vast majority of YouTube comments are not multiclausal, there is not much of a difference between clause-initial, sentence-initial and comment-initial position.

-clause-final (485/886 occurrences, about 55% of all occurrences)

Clause-final LOL is used at the end, which means the right, of a clause. Most of the time, it is not clearly separated from the argument structure of the verb, even though it is still not located inside it:

But punctuation is again sometimes used to separate it from the clause:

It is to be noted that clause-medial LOL is highly unlikely and in fact not present in the dataset. Or course, there are cases of comment-medial LOL, but in this case LOL either appears at the end or at the beginning of a clause. This seems quite logical for a discourse marker, which is never internal to the argument structure of the verb. LOL placement, in this perspective, seems comparable to laughter's in conversation, which is unlikely to be found in the middle of sentences as Robert Provine argues: "Laughter occurs at places in the speech stream associated with pauses, phrase boundaries, and the beginning and ends of statements and questions. Thus, a speaker may say, 'You are going where? ha-ha,' but rarely 'You are going –ha-ha-where?'" (Provine, 2007: 300). Nevertheless, it may sometimes prove difficult to decide with certainty whether LOL is clause-final or clause-initial when it is used in the middle of a comment. This is mostly the case in comments that contain no or non-reliable punctuation, and/or no or non-reliable capitalization. It may also be the case in comments whose meaning is unclear or which do not make sense at all. However, this is not that frequent, in part because there aren't many multi-clausal comments, and it amounts to approximately 1% of all occurrences.

-Stand-alone lol (209/886 occurrences, about 23% of all occurrences)

The third and last position in which LOL is used by commenters is a bit different from the first two because this time, it implies that LOL is used with no accompanying clause:

However, it can sometimes be coupled with other modalities that have the same function, for example LOL and an emoji "crying tears of joy", or LOL and more traditional interjections such as Ha ha:

In all cases, lol is not used to accompany or modify another element and is therefore considered as standing alone.

4. Functions of LOL in each position

In order to understand the function of LOL, one has to look to its immediate and general context. Indeed, as a discourse marker, LOL is a "sequentially dependent" marker, which then functions "in relation to ongoing talk and text" (Schiffrin 2005: 57). As a result, its precise value is context-dependent. In the case of a comment posted on YouTube, the context in question can be a preceding utterance, some part of the utterance where LOL appears, to its left or right, or the video which is commented.

-Functions of stand-alone LOL

Stand-alone LOL is rather frequent since it totals nearly a quarter of all occurrences of LOL in the dataset. Its most obvious function generally corresponds to the straightforward expressive function of LOL, which is showing one's amusement:

All the comments above have approximately the same value and content as a clause saying "I found that funny". However, this is not their only function. As Schiffrin remarks, markers work at different levels of discourse and can act on different planes of talk at the same time (Schiffrin 2005: 57). This is the case of LOL: apart from its expressive function, stand-alone LOL also achieves a second concomitant function, which is a socio-pragmatic function, located at the level of the interaction. The stance-taking theory of John W. DuBois (DuBois 2007) may be of some help to understand what this second function is about. For DuBois, one of the most important stakes of interaction is for participants to position themselves and position others and objects of interest in and by language. It means that interpersonal stakes such as appraisal and alignment are at the heart of interaction. This is all the more true in comments posted on social media, whose main purpose is to position oneself with respect to the commented object. Commenting on a video basically means taking a stance with respect to the video. By using LOL to express their amusement, commenters also approve of the video or align with it or its author. LOL, in this perspective, can be considered as a stance-taking device. Its function is not only expressive but socio-pragmatic: it enables to "display a participation framework" as Schiffrin calls it (2005: 57).

-Functions of clause-initial LOL

In the dataset, clause-initial LOL is almost as frequent as stand-alone LOL, and it has many similarities with it. First of all, it fulfils functions similar to stand-alone LOL. Namely, it has an expressive function (expressing amusement), and in doing so it has a socio-pragmatic function (expressing approval and alignment). However, contrary to stand-alone LOL, it can function in two different ways: it can refer back to the whole video, or it can sometimes refer forward to a specific element in the video which is mentioned on the right.
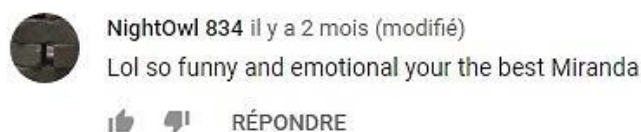
The most frequent functioning is the first, where clause-initial LOL refers to the whole video. Indeed, in most cases in the dataset, clause-initial LOL is also comment-initial and in this case, it constitutes a first reaction to the video, which is then developed or completed on the right, in the rest of the comment. This pattern is rather frequent in the dataset since it concerns 18% of all occurrences. Here is one such comment:

KAWAII SPRINKLES:3 il y a 4 heures
LOL This is better than the original one!

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Just as stand-alone LOL, this occurrence of clause-initial LOL expresses a first, immediate or spontaneous reaction that precedes verbal expression. The clause that follows, "this is better than the original one", then offers an additional comment that develops the initial reaction or completes it. This two-step operation is even clearer in comments which clearly separate comment-initial LOL and the following clause by means of punctuation. In this case, comment-initial LOL clearly functions as stand-alone LOL:

Laurie McCann il y a 11 mois
LOL!!!!!!!!!! You're so mean!!! Hahahahaha!!!!!!!!!!

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

The clause that follows LOL in this pattern of use may develop the initial reaction or not. Sometimes it does:

NightOwl 834 il y a 2 mois (modifié)
Lol so funny and emotional your the best Miranda

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

In the comment above, "so funny" confirms the user's reaction to the video. But sometimes the following clause barely has something to do with the initial reaction:

Natalia Z il y a 1 an
Lol I luv haters back off

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

The second part of this comment does not even concern the video since it is about Miranda's tv show, "Haters Back Off". What it does, however, is making the participation framework explicit. "I luv haters back off" displays positive appraisal of Miranda, and so does "you're the best Miranda" in the preceding comment. Both comments contain direct expressions of alignment that confirm or make explicit what LOL already implies.

In those comments, the meaning of LOL is computed through backward reference. The reaction is expressed with respect to the whole video and the clause that follows LOL only completes the reaction. Interestingly enough, a second pattern is present in the dataset, which this time implies forward reference. In this case, the element to which LOL expresses a reaction is not the video as a whole but some part of it, specifically, which is mentioned in the clause on the right, by means of a precise timing:

Gerda ZZ Czesznak-Molnar il y a 6 mois
lol 1:20

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Or through a quotation:

Wolf's are Magical il y a 1 an
Lol "if you ax me"

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Or thanks to any mention of an element appearing in the video:

Amber goddess il y a 1 an
Lol the barbie + choppie choppie rollie rollie

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

This is particularly interesting since backward reference is generally said to be more frequent, or a more natural way to process information in discourse. In the dataset too, forward reference to an element mentioned on the right is far less frequent than backward reference since it only concerns 25 occurrences. The reverse pattern implying backward reference, which is a comment composed of a quotation, a timing or the mention of a precise element of the video followed by LOL, is a lot more frequent since it concerns 162 occurrences. It may be due to the fact that the mentioned or quoted passage is the topic the message is about. Thus, it is what needs to be mentioned first for the message to be more easily understood. For the same reason, it also seems more logical to provide the object of the reaction before the reaction itself.

-Functions of clause-final LOL

Clause-final LOL is the most frequent position in the dataset, and by far, since it concerns more than half of all occurrences. Again, clause-final LOL can be used to react to a precise element of the video and align oneself with the video or Miranda. In this case, as it has been explained above, the element, passage or quotation which the user reacts to is mentioned first and LOL is inserted on the right:

thatcoolfool il y a 2 mois
1:05 lol Flynn cried in the background

👍 1 👎 RÉPONDRE

Madison Melvin il y a 2 mois
1:55 TO THE END LOLOLOL

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Michelle Cornwall il y a 2 mois
Shopy shopy rolly rolly lol

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

EMILY Cipres il y a 3 semaines
"I can be Donald trump" LOL

This is frequently the case since about 33% of clause-final LOLs have this function (162/485). However, clause-final LOL also offers two other functions which do not seem to be accessible to sentence-initial LOL or stand-alone LOL, one of which is in fact the most frequent function of clause-final LOL.

The first one more or less corresponds to O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adam's conception of "laughter as instruction to hear" (O'Donnell-Trujillo 1983: 186), or how laughter gives information on how an utterance is to be taken in face-to-face conversation. This function has already been analysed by CMC scholars with respect to emoticons and emoji. For instance, Walther and D'Addario 2001 explored how emoticons contribute to message interpretation. Dresner & Herring 2010 then developed the idea that emoticons may be used as illocutionary force markers. Similarly, LOL can indicate that a remark is not to be taken literally, or that it is meant as a joke. This function is in fact the most frequent function of clause-final LOL, and the most frequent function of LOL in the whole dataset: 29% (256/886) of all occurrences of LOL are used at the end of clauses that would have a different force without it, or which would be interpreted differently. In this case, LOL can be identified as an illocutionary force marker in a way similar to emoticons and emoji. Here are a few examples:

ASMR-with- Gwen il y a 1 an
What is wrong with you lol

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

qiang zhuang il y a 1 an
Poor toys lol

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Alisha Morgan il y a 1 an
She ruined my childhood lol

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Jackie Tackett il y a 2 mois
Leave the doll alone Miranda loll

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

lilyne ruffin il y a 1 an
Your a monster. LOL 😊😊😊

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

Felicity Block il y a 1 an
This is the scariest video ever.. lol

👍 👎 RÉPONDRE

All those comments contain remarks that could be perceived as negative or aggressive. But in all of them, LOL enables to calibrate the force of the utterance and give indication as to how it is to be perceived (namely as a joke / not at face value). If LOL was taken away, the comment could be taken as a piece of criticism or aggression. Adding LOL therefore also enables to manage facework online, i.e., not hurting the hearer's feelings, or defusing potential tension.

The second function exclusive to clause-final LOL is when LOL is inserted after a statement that seems neither humorous nor ambiguous or aggressive, and whose meaning therefore seems rather literal. In such a context, LOL does not seem to be needed and could well be taken away without changing the force and meaning of the clause:

Jennifer Faircloth il y a 2 mois
Hy Miranda!! lol great new song I love u and missed you lol

👍 👎! RÉPONDRE

AwesomelyAmazing il y a 2 mois
I was crying and laughing at the same time! Poor Flynn! I love you Miranda! Lol

👍 1 👎! RÉPONDRE

Nicole Villatoro il y a 1 jour
My baby brother like your song lol 💕👶

👍 👎! RÉPONDRE

G-Bo Marie il y a 2 mois
That was great. Made me shake my head and smile. lol

👍 👎! RÉPONDRE

Using LOL alongside an utterance whose meaning is literal, or that does not require mitigation, is not that rare since it is the case in 64 occurrences of LOL in the dataset. Why is then LOL used at the end of those clauses? Robert Provine provides one possible explanation in a 1996 article which reports on a study on laughter in face-to-face conversation where he and his team found out that most of the time, laughter seems to follow banal remarks. He suggests that laughter, in this case, has a social or phatic function: it is aimed at creating empathy. Similarly, in the comments above, LOL is not used to express amusement or manage illocutionary force, it rather functions as a way to bond with the potential reader by showing the commenter's benevolent state of mind. This is especially obvious in comments that are addressed to other readers, such as the comment at the bottom of the page:

Tristan dow il y a 1 an
anyone else think of sid from toy story when whe was putting the toys together lol??

👍 👎! RÉPONDRE

This comment is not particularly humorous, not offensive, not meant as a joke, and has no double meaning. In this case, LOL seems to merely aim at creating complicity, in the fashion reported by Provine. This may be a bit ironic in a world of single-turn interactions such as YouTube comment threads, where most comments are never responded to.

5. Conclusion and perspectives

The conclusion to this study is threefold:
A first conclusion is that LOL still enables to laugh online. It may not always literally be a loud laugh, it may just be a chuckle, a chortle or a snort, but it is still a laugh, which has most of the functions of laughter in face-to-face conversation. This aspect, i.e, the correspondence between LOL in computer-mediated discourse and laughter in face to face interaction, is very complex and would deserve a study of its own.

A second conclusion is that LOL has functions that are comparable to emoji and emoticons and other more traditional interjections such as HA HA. It would also be interesting to try and see whether there is any specialized use emerging, and factors of choice between those markers.

A last conclusion is the answer to this paper's opening research question, which is the possible correlation between position and function of LOL. The initial hypothesis proved to be partly wrong. Indeed, LOL can be used to express a reaction and, by consequence, as an indicator of stance, in any position: alone, in front of, or at the end of a clause. Nevertheless, position is not unrelated to function since some functions seem to be reserved to final position. In this position, LOL often functions as a kind of punctuation, in the same way as emoticons and emoji that appear at the end of an utterance, whose use is comparable to question marks or exclamation marks according to Dresner and Herring (2010: 263). Of course, it remains to be seen whether those results would be the same in another context of use, such as a multi-turn interaction, or in other languages such as French or Italian, where LOL is also used.

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