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‘ONLY IDIOTS GET VACCINATED  
W’: A CORPUS-ASSISTED  
ANALYSIS OF LAUGHTER-TEXT  
IN JAPANESE ONLINE  
(ANTI-)VACCINATION  
DISCOURSES

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the textual representation of laughter in the subforum *korona wakuchin tte yabaku nai?* ‘isn’t the COVID-19 vaccine insane?’ on the Japanese web forum *5channeru* ‘Channel 5’. On Channel 5, user interaction is very straight-talking and the COVID-19 vaccine is framed as a highly controversial topic – two factors that prompt interactants to signal (dis)affiliation with the (no-vax) stance in a variety of ways, one of which is laughter. The study focuses on the character ‘w’, which conventionally denotes laughter in written Japanese, and asks what the interactional functions of written laughter are and what elicits it. The analysis of 3,006 comments (285,582 tokens) revealed 195 instances of ‘w’ used to index laughter. The close reading of concordances, combined with collocational analysis, showed that, in this specific setting, laughter is almost invariably triggered by the very same post it is embedded in and often accompanies messages conveying aggression towards or superiority over the recipient (laughing *at*). Methodologically, the study demonstrates that CADS methods and taxonomies can be applied across discourse types and languages and, conversely, the systematic analysis of languages other than English can add to our ability to uncover non-obvious meanings.

**KEYWORDS**

laughter, dis/affiliation, evaluation, impoliteness, Japanese language, computer-mediated communication

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# 'Only Idiots Get Vaccinated w': A Corpus-Assisted Analysis of Laughter-Text in Japanese Online (Anti-)Vaccination Discourses

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## 1. Introduction

Laughter has been investigated at length across disciplines (Askenasy, 1987; Bergson, 1900; Morreall, 1983, 1987; Provine, 2000). In the field of linguistics specifically, it is usually examined as a by-product of humour (Chapman & Foot, 1996; Chiaro, 2018; Gironzetti *et al.*, 2016; Norrick, 2003; Ziv, 1988). To date, *The linguistics of laughter* (Partington, 2006) is perhaps the most detailed study that combines corpus linguistic tools with the careful exploration of interactional cues in context to identify spontaneous laughter and analyse its interactional functions. Contrary to earlier non-corpus-based research (e.g., Bergson, 1900; Wierzbicka, 1999), Partington (2006) carefully distinguishes humour from laughter and observes that humorous laughter is relatively rare in his corpus of press briefings held at the White House. His findings convincingly demonstrate that laughter involves many complexities, and that humour is just one of the many functions it can acquire in context. In what follows, I intend to further Partington's train of thought by applying some of his theoretical and methodological claims on laughter-talk, that is, 'the talk preceding and provoking, intentionally or otherwise, a bout of laughter' (Partington, 2006, p. 1) to laughter-*text* in the Japanese web forum *5channeru* 'Channel 5'. The investigation of laughter (text) in languages other than English is expected to uncover aspects of laughter that are not currently accounted for.

### 1.1. Laughter-text and written laughter

Mirroring Partington's (2006, p. 1) definition of laughter-talk, I define laughter-text as the text preceding and provoking *written* laughter. I will favour the term laughter-*text* over laughter-*talk* simply because my data come from a written online forum which is quite different from the spoken dimension Partington examines. The role of laughter in online fora is relatively understudied. In fact, whilst the significance of laughter in co-present settings has been widely recognised (e.g., Günther, 2003; Partington, 2006; Provine, 2000), written laughter has not received the attention it deserves until very recently (e.g., McSweeney, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2016; Wang & Taylor, 2019). What prompted empirically grounded studies of computer-mediated forms of communication in general, and how laughter manifests itself in these settings in particular, was the articulation of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA; Herring, 2004). Among the assumptions underlying CMDA, two are particularly relevant to this study. First, online envir-

onments are more varied and complex than envisioned by early descriptions (Herring, 2005, p. 614). Second, the theoretical and methodological paradigms developed for the investigation of (co-present) spoken and (non-computer mediated) written interaction can be applied to online forms of communication and the language used therein (Herring, 2004; see also Blommaert, 2019). CMDA convincingly shows that, while it cannot be denied that properties of the medium inevitably affect language use, online forms of communication can be approached by applying rigorous methods that were not necessarily developed for the cyberspace. Such an approach ensures replicability, rejects a deterministic view of mediated communication and motivates my decision to test whether claims on co-present laughter apply to written laughter.

The term ‘written laughter’ (Grundlingh, 2020; McKay, 2015) overlaps with what elsewhere is referred to as ‘cyberlaughter’ (Hübler & Bell, 2003), ‘e-laughter’ (Adamic *et al.*, 2015; Larson, 2015) or simply ‘laughter’ (Taylor, 2009; Wang & Taylor, 2019) and denotes any kind of visual resources (emoji, emoticons, textual representation of laughter sounds, etc.) that indexes laughter in written forms of communication. Visual resources indexing laughter in written Japanese are particularly varied and include: 笑, the Chinese character that forms the verb *warau* 笑う (‘to laugh’); the character ‘w’ (either as a single character or in strings, e.g., ‘wwwww’), which comes from the first letter of the transcription in the Roman alphabet of *wara* 笑 (‘laughter’); *kaomoji* (‘face characters’) like ( > < ); and emojis and emoticons. Recently, the character *kusa* 草 (‘grass’), which originally referred to strings of ‘w’ representing continuous or emphasised laughter and visually resembling blades of grass, has also come to index laughter.

Written laughter in all its forms is a highly indexical sign that is used differently in different settings and whose meanings arise predominantly from its textual environment. For example, previous studies on English associated written laughter with indirectness (McSweeney, 2016), phatic communication (Tagliamonte, 2016) and mock politeness (Wang & Taylor, 2019). In this latter case, written laughter can purposefully exploit the plausible deniability (Pinker *et al.*, 2008; Terkourafi, 2011) of a device commonly associated with pro-social behaviour. Plausible deniability is a strategy that allows the producer to indirectly convey their intentions, whilst at the same time leaving open the possibility of denying or ignoring them should they not conform to the recipient’s expectations/desires. Written laughter, then, is highly context-specific. What is certain is that it does not necessarily index actual laughter.

## 1.2. Research questions

In his chapter on laughter-talk and face-work, Partington (2006) writes:

The principal function of laughter-talk in this particular discourse situation is to situate oneself in relation to a group in three possible ways. First, as an insider when using aggressive humour against another out-party. Second, when one wishes to adopt an expert

persona, as an outsider, superior to the group. And finally, when one indulges in self-denigratory humour, as an outsider but one 'inferior' to the group, non-threatening and pleading for clemency and sympathy. (p. 109)

Combining Partington's analysis with previous studies on laughter and humour across disciplines, I will refer to these three ways in which one can relate to the group as 'Aggressive' (Nihonmatsu & Wakashima, 2018; Partington, 2006, p. 109), 'Superiority' (Descartes, 1649; Morreall, 1987, p. 168) and 'Self-denigrating' (Kádár & Zhou, 2021) laughter. A fourth important type not explicitly mentioned in the above quote but examined at length by Partington is 'Supportive' (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 1687) or 'Affiliative' (Partington, 2006, p. 92) laughter, i.e., the use of laughter to enhance relationships with others. Laughter types will be assessed by paying focused attention to the wider context surrounding each laughter episode, i.e., the laughter-text. Terminologically, I will avoid the use of the term 'humour' whenever possible. The reasoning behind this choice is that the object of analysis is, indeed, laughter, which in my texts, as will be seen, tends to be a *social* phenomenon, rather than something in direct response to humour (Provine, 2000, p. 42).

In sum, my aim is to expand on Partington's (2006) study by examining how the above-mentioned types of laughter are used (or are not used) in a different setting, i.e., the Japanese web forum *5channeru* 'Channel 5'. This translates into the following research questions:

1. What are the functions of laughter-text?
2. What elicits laughter?

In what follows, I begin by providing an overview of written laughter, before introducing Channel 5 and the tools and methods employed for the data collection and analysis. I then address each research question in turn. A critical discussion of my findings and future directions concludes the paper.

## 2. Data and methods

### 2.1. Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies

CADS (Partington, 2003; Partington *et al.*, 2013) investigates language use combining and shunting back and forth between corpus-based statistical analysis and horizontal close-reading. A corpus approach has many advantages, three of which are the following. First, the texts employed for the analysis are produced independently from the researcher, hence are not subject to the much-cited observer's paradox (Labov, 1978). Second, corpus tools can reveal both frequency *and* infrequency, shedding light on conventionalised as well as creative linguistic constructions. Finally, if corpus data are made publicly available and the analytical process is reported in detail, a corpus approach is likely to ensure a high degree of transparency and replicability. What distinguishes

CADS from traditional corpus linguistics is the emphasis on the qualitative enterprise of interpreting discourse units in context as a way of complementing the more quantitative aspects of corpus tools. This study does employ corpus methods for the three reasons given above but is weighted towards the discourse analysis side of the CADS spectrum.

## 2.2. Channel 5

The platform selected for the data collection is *5channeru 5 ちゃんねる* ('Channel 5', also known as '5ch'), a heavily text-based anonymous Japanese online bulletin board system. Channel 5 was established in 2017 by redirecting the original domain Channel 2, which, according to the New York Times (Onishi, 2004), was the most popular online community in Japan in the early 2000s. Channel 5 was favoured over similar platforms because participants interrelate mainly in an *interactional* – as opposed to *transactional* (Brown & Yule, 1983) – mode, and laughter tends to occur within phases of interaction (Partington, 2006, p. 10). Moreover, the normative standards of the community encourage an informal and direct way of talking which is expected to favour the production of laughter in written texts. The collected data come from a specific subforum within Channel 5 entitled *korona wakuchin tte yabaku nai?* ('isn't the COVID vaccine insane?') (Channel 5, 2021) and launched on May 26, 2021. Each thread can consist of up to 1,002 comments, of which 1,000 are from the users, and two are automatically produced by the forum to signal that the maximum number of comments allowed has been reached, and to redirect users to the next page of the thread. At the time of writing (September 2023), the subforum, which is still being regularly updated, consists of 563 threads, for a total of 563,000 comments of variable length – there are no restrictions on text length. These numbers testify to the popularity of Channel 5. Zooming in on the text, the COVID-19 vaccine is framed as a highly controversial topic and provokes many heated discussions (similarly to what is observed by Coltman-Patel *et al.* [2022] on Mumsnet). In the subforum, users convey their feelings and attitudes towards the vaccine and vaccine decisions, and signal (dis)affiliation with the (no-vax) stance shared by the majority of users. This can be done in a variety of ways, one of which is laughter.

An online forum is clearly a very different context from the press briefing question-response discourse examined by Partington (2006). For example, communication is not co-present and spoken but asynchronous and written. There are no a priori relations of power and the unmarked style is very informal, as opposed to the one adopted by briefers, who shift between formal and informal roles. Anonymity and the very specific topic of COVID-19 also affect interaction in important ways. However, some important similarities are also observed. In both press briefings and Channel 5, there is an audience, and that audience constitutes an in-group – where 'in-group' is broadly characterised by 'regularity of contact among members as well as a degree of shared interests' (Partington, 2006, p. 91). The role of the audience is key not only because it shapes interaction, but also because it is the 'beneficiary' (Partington, 2003, pp. 57–58) of the discourse: when someone laughs *at* someone else, they are both disaffiliating from the target, and poten-

tially affiliating with (laughing *with*) the audience. Furthermore, much face-work in both contexts is rather hostile and there are plenty of opportunities to laugh at others. If we relate frequency to conventionalisation (Terkourafi, 2001), this may signal that a certain degree of impolite and aggressive behaviour is expected in these discourse situations. These are *tertia comparationis* (i.e., features shared across two or more entities or contexts [Chesterman, 1998]) that make press briefings and web forums two fascinating, albeit quite unexpected, loci of comparison.

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis

Using the free web scraping tool ParseHub, I collected all comments from the first three threads in the subforum, for a total of 3,006 comments (285,582 tokens) produced between May and July 2021. The collected comments were then tokenised and postagged with TagAnt and uploaded onto Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.*, 2014) and AntConc (Anthony, 2023).

The data analysis process involved five main steps. First, I used Sketch Engine to carry out an exploratory keyness analysis on the Channel 5 data set using the web corpus JaTenTen11 (ca. 10 million words) as a reference corpus. A web corpus was chosen as reference to reduce differences in mode and genre. Quite unsurprisingly, six out of the first ten positive keywords in my corpus of interest (ordered by simple maths [Kilgarriff, 2009]) are semantically related to the COVID-19 vaccine (e.g., *korona* ‘corona’, *wakuchin* ‘vaccine’, *faizā* ‘Pfizer’), whilst the remaining four are items associated with forms specific to Channel 5 (see Appendix). This corroborates the assumption that there are language uses specific to this discourse type.

Second, I identified through the analysis of concordances the type of written laughter more frequently represented in my data. Here and elsewhere, for the concordance analysis of the Channel 5 sample I used AntConc, which makes it easier to access the raw data to see how the discourse unfolds. The analysis showed that, among the types of written laughter mentioned in Section 1.1, *wara* 笑 and *kusa* 草 occur only seven and five times respectively. In contrast, the character ‘w’ is used as an indexical sign for laughter around 200 times, a frequency that demands attention. Its extensive use in online forms of communication was further confirmed by a query on the JaTenTen11.

CADS is ‘properly comparative’ (Partington, 2003, p. 10) and we can estimate the significance and generalisability of a particular finding only if we test it against different data. In line with this comparative nature of CADS, and to further assess whether Channel 5 conforms or otherwise to web practices, as a third step I looked at the collocational network of the character ‘w’ in the JaTenTen11. The collocational analysis of written laughter in a more general web corpus provides background information against which my findings can be tested.

As a fourth step, I went back to the Channel 5 data set and ran again the concordancer to collect all instances of ‘w’ (either a single character or in strings) with up to 25 words of co-text on each side. The longest string observed in the data is





### 3.1. Written laughter in the JaTenTen11

As a point of departure, I looked the character ‘w’ up in the 10-million-word web corpus JaTenTen11. More specifically, I relied on the analysis of collocates, which allows for a bird-like view of the semantic contexts where written laughter is used. To avoid including too much noise in the data, I looked for the collocates of the character ‘w’ either in strings of two characters (i.e., ‘ww’), or of four to 60 characters (e.g., ‘wwwwww’, ‘wwwwwww’, etc.). This choice is the result of a preliminary collocational analysis, which showed that including ‘w’ as a single character or in strings of three characters leads to the collection of noise, mainly in the form of URLs and users’ IDs. The threshold of 60 is motivated by the fact that, as already mentioned, in the texts collected from Channel 5 the longest string was made up of 60 characters.

Table 1 shows the 15 most typical collocates (span L4-R4) that resulted from the analysis. Note that strings of the character ‘w’ have been removed from the Table, but were pervasive. Their pervasiveness is worth noting, because it corroborates the hypothesis that laughter tends to occur in chunks and hints at the interactional role of repetition (Machi, 2022), but is not further discussed below because it gives little information on what laughter-text is about.

#	Collocate	Translation	LogDice
1	<i>wa(rota)</i> ワロタ	internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	7.41
2	<i>zama</i> ざま	‘it serves you right’	6.57
3	<i>warota</i> ワロタ	internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	6.46
4	<i>wa(rota)</i> ワロタ	internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	6.07
5	<i>kuso-warota</i> クソワロタ	‘shitty’ + internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	6.05
6	<i>tsuee</i> つええ	‘strong [non-standard]’	5.93
7	<i>kimee</i> きめえ	‘disgusting [non-standard]’	5.87
8	<i>cho</i> ちょ	[part of a user ID]	5.79
9	<i>warosu</i> ワロス	internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	5.59
10	<i>saasen</i> サーセン	‘I won’t let you [non-standard]’	5.52
11	<i>saasen</i> サ-セン	‘I won’t let you [non-standard]’	5.43
12	<i>suguru</i> すぎる	‘too much [non-standard]’	5.42
13	<i>warota</i> ワロタ	internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	5.35



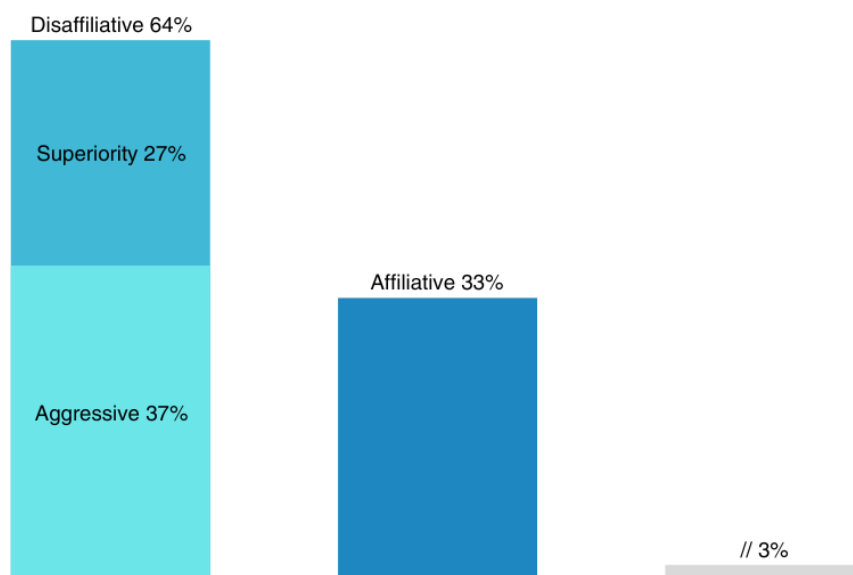
14	<i>warosu</i> ワロス	internet slang that signals laughter [non-standard]	5.27
15	<i>ukeru</i> ウケる	'hilarious [non-standard]'	5.32

**Table 1:** Collocates of written laughter in the JaTenTen11 (span L4-R4, ordered by LogDice)

The list of collocates gives us an idea of what types of items orbit around written laughter in the web at large. Almost every collocate in the table is an internet abbreviation or does not adhere to the standard (for the scope of the present paper, and oversimplifying, 'standard' refers to the dictionary form) in three main ways: it employs a different writing system than the one usually associated with that word; the morphology is manipulated in creative ways; and/or is a slang term specific to the internet. This signals that written laughter in the form of the character 'w' is primed (Hoey, 2005) for use in a specific register, and to occur with other items that are also characteristic of online communication. More interesting for the scope of the present paper, is that many collocates semantically refer to laughter – what Sinclair (2004) calls 'semantic preference'. This suggests that, on the web at large, the character 'w' generally keeps good company, in that it is associated with (affiliative) humour.

### 3.2. Types of laughter-text on Channel 5

Channel 5, however, does not conform to the web practices illustrated in the previous section. Culpeper writes that '[t]here are contexts where impoliteness is highly regular' (Culpeper, 2011, p. 47). Channel 5 is one of those (e.g., Nishimura, 2010; Hirai, 2007; Ishizaka & Yamamoto, 2010). Figure 1 addresses research question 1 and illustrates the types of laughter-text with their frequencies. The data were coded by paying focused attention to the extended co-text which, as intended here, covers the entire post where the laughing character was employed and any previous or following posts this may refer to, as illustrated in the tags that the users employ to address each other in the forum (see, for instance, Examples 1 and 2). A few instances were rather decontextualised, and their ambiguity could not be solved (e.g., *wakuchin busoku w w w kita ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~* 'vaccine shortage w w w here it comes', with no reference to a shortage of vaccines in the previous messages). These concordances were coded as //.



**Figure 1:** Types of laughter-text in the Channel 5 sample

Of the four types of laughter-text illustrated in Section 1.1, only three were observed, namely Aggressive, Superiority (collectively illustrated in the figure as Disaffiliative) and Affiliative. These will be addressed in turn. The absence of Self-denigrating laughter-text in my sample stands out and suggests that acts that threaten the producer's face may be implausible in Channel 5, a highly combative setting where self-deprecation is not likely to be an effective interactional strategy. Clearly, however, caution is required, as my data-set is small and I encountered a number of interpretability issues (Gillings & Mautner, 2023). The role laughter plays in interaction is in fact rarely simple or transparent. Moreover, in a number of instances, the co-text was either virtually non-existent or too unspecific to deduce meaning. Even when that was not the case, the forum is designed for a very specific subset of people who are very familiar with the language they use, which is quite difficult to pick up for an outsider. This is all the more evidence that the portrayal of laughter often revolves around shared knowledge. As such, the uses and functions of laughter can be rather obscure to the observer. With the aim to at least partly mitigate these interpretability issues, concordances that resisted categorisation were coded with the help of an external informant who is a native speaker of Japanese and all discrepancies were resolved through discussion. To ensure transparency, the annotated concord-

ance corpus can be accessed through the link in the Appendix. Despite these limitations, some rather clear tendencies in the uses and functions of laughter-text were observed.

### 3.3. Aggressive

Aggressive or other-denigrating (Partington, 2006, 2017a) laughter-text alone accounts for 37% of the concordances analysed. Almost one-third of these display conventionalised impoliteness formula (Culpeper, 2010) and perform bald on-record impoliteness, i.e., a direct, clear and unambiguous way of threatening face (Culpeper, 1996, p. 356). In the following examples, conventionalised impoliteness is double underlined to distinguish it from implicational impoliteness (underlined) – two types of face-damaging behaviour further discussed below. Bold is used for the number of the original post, whilst italics for the tag(s) calling attention to a previous message the original post refers or replies to.

- (1) **991** *Wakuchin sesshū ni yoru yūgai jishō no hōkoku no repōto de Fatal de shibō ja nakattara nan nan da yo. JKoko ni kaiteru kedo. Baka chūsotsu dakara, yomenain da ne. Kawaiō na chūsotsu mushoku ossan w w w*  
**991** ワクチン接種による有害事象の報告のレポートで Fatal で死亡じゃなかったらなんなんだよ。↓ここに書いてるけど。馬鹿中卒だから、読めないんだね。可哀想な中卒無職おっさん w w w  
 ('991 In the report of adverse events due to vaccine administration, what else could *Fatal* be if it's not death? It's written right here ↓. You can't read it because you're a stupid high school dropout. Poor unemployed middle-aged man w w w)
- (2) **886** All UK spontaneous reports received between 9/12/20 and 16/06/21 for mRNA Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine analysis print. *To kaiteatte Fatal no kazu ga kaiteatte wakuchin igai ni nan nan da yo. Teigakure sarashiteiru no wa docchi da yo w*  
**887** >> 886 Yappa, baka ka w.  
**886** All UK spontaneous reports received between 9/12/20 and 16/06/21 for mRNA Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine analysis print. と書いてあって Fatal の数字が書いてあってワクチン以外になんなんだよ。低学歴さらしているのはどっちだよ w  
**887** >> 886 やっぱ、馬鹿か w  
 ('886 It's written that "All UK spontaneous reports received between 9/12/20 and 16/06/21 for mRNA Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine analysis print", and it reports the number of Fatal cases, so what else could it be besides the vaccine? Who's showing their lack of education here? w  
**887** >> 886 Are you actually that stupid? w')

We have seen that, in the JaTenTen11, the laughing character 'w' seems to be commonly associated with pro-social behaviour. However, this is not the case here, where written laughter co-occurs with expressions located in a continuum ranging from conventionalised impoliteness (e.g., *baka* 'stupid', *gomi* 'trash', *bakabakashii* 'dumb' and *aho* 'idiot') to implicational impoliteness (e.g., *chūsotsu mushoku ossan* 'unemployed middle-aged man') (Culpeper, 2011, pp. 155–156). Despite the latter being more context-depend-

ent, hence less conventionalised for aggressive behaviour, it is not necessarily less face-threatening. Both types of impoliteness further reinforce the illocutionary force of the utterance, which is unambiguously aggressive.

The pervasiveness of disaffiliative aggressive written laughter suggests that, in my data, the laughing character ‘w’ is a device conventionalised as an indexical sign of impoliteness. Put in a different way, once the laughing character is recognised, it alerts users of Channel 5 to expect some degree of impoliteness, because that is the way interaction works in this setting. Importantly, however, aggressive laughter-text works on a binary position structure (Androutsopoulos, 2023, p. 150): although it performs impoliteness towards, hence disaffiliating from, someone, it simultaneously conveys affiliation towards someone else. That is to say, perpetuating conflict with, e.g. a pro-vaccination poster, also creates common ground with other users who share the no-vax stance (a point further elaborated on in Section 3.2.3). Notably, a similar process of pragmaticalisation in which an impolite/mock polite sense of written laughter emerges in specific contexts has been observed for the Chinese onomatopoeic word *hehe* (Wang & Taylor, 2019, p. 278) and the English term *kek*, which stems from the online video game World of Warcraft, where it appears as a translation for lol (laughing out loud) in the language of the Horde faction (Online Hate Research and Education Project, 2023, p. 43). This may hint at cross-linguistic similarities in the uses and functions of laughter in online spaces.

### 3.4. Superiority

Superiority is the second type (27%) of disaffiliative laughter-text and expresses the producer’s belief that they are more capable, competent and qualified than the recipient(s). It overlaps to some degree with aggressive laughter-text because both are employed in situations where it is not in the producer’s interest to maintain the recipient’s face, or where there may be some advantage in not doing so (Culpeper, 1996, p. 354). Indeed, both are instances of disaffiliation. However, laughter-text aimed at conveying superiority is not accompanied by conventionalised impoliteness formulae. Semantically, it is often related to notions of competence, background and education, whilst formally it can take the form of giving unsolicited advice or other acts implying some form of superiority over the recipient. Similarly to aggressive laughter-text, behaviours labelled as Superiority can be located along a continuum, ranging from mild face-threatening acts, as in Example 3, to explicit assessments of authority and power over others, as in Example 4.

- (3) 632 *Jishuku shitatte osamaru wake janai. Jishuku sureba suru hodo nagabiku dake da yo. Jishuku ni wa genkai ga aru. Demo, korona (= tada no kaze) no kansenryoku wa, sore o uwamawaru. Dakara jishuku wa muda. Korona wa kafun kurai no mono dakara, kansen shite mo kowakunai. Korona ga kowai to omowasetagaru no wa, wakuchin o uta setai yatsura no teguchi dakara. Damasarenai de ne w*  
 632 自粛したって収まるわけじゃない。自粛すればするほど長引くだけだよ。自粛には限界がある。でも、コロナ(=ただのカゼ)の感染力は、それを上回る。だから自粛はムダ。コロナは花粉くらいのもものだから、感染しても怖くない。コロナが怖いと思わせたがるのは、ワクチンを打たせたい奴らの手口だから。だまされない

でね w

(‘632 Self-restraint doesn't necessarily lead to a solution. The more you self-restrain, the longer it drags on. There's a limit to self-restraint. However, the infectious power of COVID-19 (= just a common cold) surpasses that. So, self-restraint is useless. COVID-19 is like pollen, so it's not scary even if you get infected. Making you think that COVID-19 is scary is just a trick to get you vaccinated. Don't be fooled w’)

- (4) 948 >> 944 *Sō na no? Ima, Waseda no insei dakedo, omae no gakureki wa?*  
 949 *Ato wa kojīn no kangaekata no jiyū Uchitai hito wa uteba yoi yo wwwww*  
 950 >> 948 *Yappari, ore no hō ga ue da wa w*  
 948 >> 944 そうなの？ 今、早稲田の院生だけど、お前の学歴は？  
 949 あとは個人の考え方の自由 打ちたい人は打てばよいよ wwwww  
 950 >> 948 やっぱり、俺のほうが上だわ w  
 (‘948 >> 944 Is that so? I'm a graduate student at Waseda now, but what about your educational background?  
 949 After all, it's a matter of personal choice. If you want to get vaccinated, go ahead and do it  
 wwwww  
 950 >> 948 As I thought, I'm above you w’)

The above examples further illustrate how implicational impoliteness manifests itself in laughter-text. For instance, is not difficult to think of a situation in which the question *omae no gakureki wa?* ‘what about your educational background?’ may be closer to unmarked behaviour. In Example 4, however, contextual features clearly signal that the utterance is to be taken as a face-attack implying that the recipient is not well-educated, or not as much as the producer, hence signalling superiority over them.

### 3.5. Affiliative

Rossi *et al.* (2023) write that ‘[p]rosociality and cooperation are key to what makes us human’ (p. 1). Affiliative laughter-text is precisely a form of cooperation between interactants because it addresses the other’s positive face by signalling ‘interest and approval of each other’s personality, presuppositions indicating shared wants and shared knowledge’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 104), agreement and common ground. It also invites others to laugh with the producer (Chiaro, 2018, p. 124). Affiliative laughter-text occurs in 33% of concordances and is exemplified by the following exchange:

- (5) 502 *Kore demo wakuchin sesshu suru hito wa tada no aho to shika iiyō ga nai w w w*  
 504 >> 502 *Kono dēta mite maikai omou kedo purasebo de kore dattara somosomo wakuchin nante iran yan w w w*  
 502 これでもワクチン接種する人はタダのアホとしか言いようがない w w w  
 504 >> 502 このデータ見て毎回思うけどプラセボでこれだったらそもそもワクチンなんていらんやん w w w  
 (‘502 Even so, those who are getting vaccinated are just idiots w w w

504 >> 502 Every time I see this data I think that if it's like this with a placebo, we don't need vaccines to start with w w w')

In Post 502, aggressive laughter-text is functional to the performance of impoliteness towards who is getting the vaccine. In replying to 502, the producer of 504 expresses affiliation with this stance through laughter-text. This brief exchange shows that affiliative and disaffiliative laughter-text are two sides of the same coin. As already mentioned, there is no affiliation without *disaffiliation*, because showing support with a specific attitude (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) or stance (Conrad & Biber, 2000) automatically implies a devaluation of other conflicting positions. This applies to evaluation in general (Hunston & Thompson, 2000). Point of view, then, is crucial for language expressing evaluation and dis/affiliation, a factor that can cause difficulties in annotating the concordances. In the current study, I distinguish between *primarily* disaffiliative and *primarily* affiliative uses of laughter-text depending on the *main* communicative aim it indexes and the perspective the producer adopts towards the recipient, as inferred from co(n)textual information.

Another example of the multifaceted nature of laughter-text and the evaluative meaning it carries in context is the following:

- (6) 920 *Iine* (dash) *Anchi wa atama warukute mo isshōkenmei ikiteru no ga binbin tsutawaru.*  
 924 >> 920 *Wakaru Anchi han wakuchin wa ganbatteru chihō wa hajimatte mo nai noni nakama 200 man nin wa zennin utta toka iidasu shi w Go-kurōsama desu!*  
 920 いいねーアンチは頭悪くても一生懸命生きてるのがピンピン伝わる  
 924 >> 920 わかるアンチ反ワクチンは頑張ってる地方は始まってもないのに仲間 200万人は全員打ったとか言い出すしwご苦労様です！  
 (920 Niceeee Even though anti-vaxxers are stupid, their efforts to live their lives to the fullest are clearly shining through  
 924 >> 920 I feel you! In some areas where the vaccination hasn't even started anti-vaxxers claim that all 2 millions of their friends are vaccinated w Well done!')

The two reciprocal tags explicitly mentioning previous posts clarify that this too is an exchange between two users. The context is key to establishing what stance users are taking. *Go-kurō sama* 'well done' is in fact an expression conventionally associated with politeness. In this context, however, an (im)politeness mismatch between the polite semantics of the utterance and the co(n)text triggers an interpretation of mock politeness (Culpeper, 2011, p. 17; Taylor, 2016). Post 924 shows affiliation with the opinion expressed previously in Post 920 by performing mock politeness towards, hence conveying disaffiliation from, the no-vax stance. Laughing *at* no-vaxxers *with* the producer of 920 is functional to signalling that they share the same communal value system. In evaluative terms, people who express an anti-vaccination stance are framed as *stupid*, hence *bad*, and they are implicitly compared with what is normal, hence *good* – in this case, the pro-vac-



cination stance. Partington's system which prioritises evaluation (Morley & Partington, 2009; Partington, 2017b) would have an annotation along the lines of:

920 [Niceee] [Even though anti-vaxxers are stupid], their efforts to live their lives to the fullest are clearly shining through

924 >> 920 (I feel you)! [In some areas where the vaccination hasn't even started anti-vaxxers claim that all 2 millions of their friends are vaccinated] w [Well done!]

Round brackets indicate positive and square brackets negative evaluation. The above annotation accounts for both open evaluation, where the literal evaluative meaning is consistent with the intended evaluative meaning (e.g., *wakaru* 'I feel you') and for reversal of evaluation (Partington, 2007) manifested through irony and sarcasm (e.g., *go-kurō sama* 'well done'). In the latter case, the intended meaning has to be inferred by the other participants in the interaction from the context, which includes previous posts and the combative nature of Channel 5.

### 3.6. *What elicits laughter?*

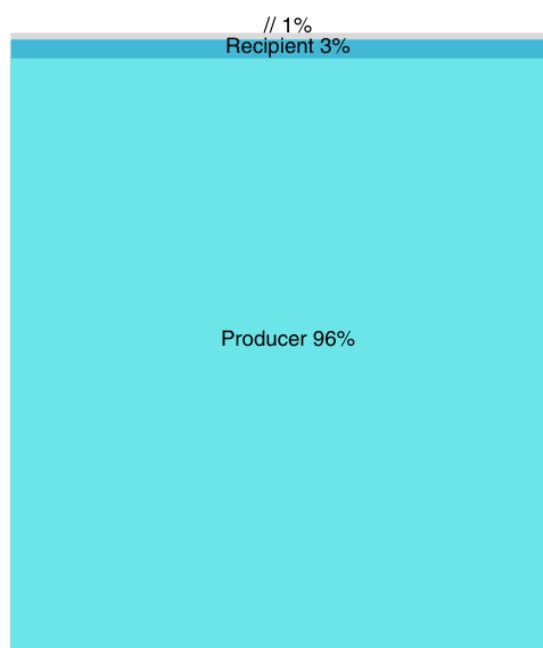
I now turn to research question 2 and elaborate on producer laughter (Example 7), as opposed to recipient laughter (Example 8):

- (7) **867** >> 865 *Wakuchin utanai omae wa ie kara deru na yo*  
*A, fudan kara detenai ka w*  
**867** >> 865 ワクチン打たないお前は家から出るなよ  
 あ、普段から出てないか w  
 ('867 >> 865 You who don't get the vaccine, don't leave your house!  
 Ah, as if you usually go out w')
- (8) **958** >> 955 *Omaera ga itteru supaiku tanpaku ga unun toka 5-nen inai ni shinu toka sou iu no wa mattaku no detarame to iu dake*  
*Omae ga taimu mashin de 0-nen ato o mite kita to iu no de areba mitomete yaru yo*  
**965** >> 958 *Warosu w w w w*  
**958** >> 955 お前らが言ってるスパイクタンパクが云々とか5年以内に死ぬとかそういうのは全くのデタラメというだけ  
 お前がタイムマシンで0年後を見てきたというのであれば認めてやるよ。  
**0965** >> 958 *ワロス w w w w*  
 ('958 >> 955 What you guys are saying about spike proteins, dying within 5 years, etc. is total bullshit  
 If you say you've seen the year 0 with a time machine, then I'll agree with you.  
**965** >> 958 Lol w w w w')

In Example 7, the producer attacks the recipient's face by implying that they have no social life because they never go out. This "humorous" comment is followed by written

laughter, which refers to and reinforces the preceding bit. Conversely, in Example 8 the string of ‘w’ is preceded by another internet slang conventionally associated with laughter, *warosu* (see also Table 1), which, similarly to ‘w’, comes from the verb *warau* 笑う (‘to laugh’) and originated amongst users of Channel 2. In other words, in this post laughter is used as a stand-alone utterance (Ginzburg *et al.*, 2020, p. 8) that exclusively indexes a display of amusement at a message previously posted in the thread and explicitly mentioned via the tag.

Previous studies have already shown that in interactional contexts speakers/producers laugh more than their audience (Provine, 2000). However, Figure 2 illustrates that in my data the difference in frequency between producer and recipient laughter is striking.



**Figure 2:** Proportions of producer and recipient laughter in the Channel 5 sample<sup>2</sup>

In oral conversation, ‘[l]aughter is often the reward for the verbal sophistication that irony is perceived as displaying’ (Partington, 2006, p. 221). As Figure 2 shows, even if this is occasionally the case in my data, it is almost invariably the producer of the utterance that indulges in laughter, which is triggered by the very same message in which the character ‘w’ (or strings of it) appears. Written laughter on Channel 5, then, is more often than not a way to exacerbate impoliteness by laughing at the recipient(s), or with the audience at the expense of a third party. Functionally, it helps convey what the producer

2 Following the same procedure adopted for the functional analysis, one example whose referent was unclear was labelled //.

intends by what they type (Dresner & Herring, 2010, p. 256) by framing the utterance in a way that, within the Channel 5 community, constrains interpretation.

In sum, producer laughter is often a way to damage the target(s)'s face (Aggressive laughter) and/or claim superior morality and better knowledge of the world (Superiority laughter), with the effect of positioning oneself on a different (higher) level. This behaviour, in turn, shows affiliation with third parties who share the same stance and are thus considered by the producer as part of the in-group they (aspire to) belong. In contrast with what was observed in the web at large (see Section 3.1), laughter (text) on Channel 5 is often found with bad company, as part of longer chunks of text conveying impoliteness. The use of written laughter to perpetuate conflict may be specific to Channel 5, or particularly combative and straight-talking forums in general.

## 4. Conclusions

The first part of this study extended notions originally developed in research on spoken interaction in English to text-based digital discourse in Japanese. The underlying claims were that laughter is a goal-driven and context-dependent social activity and that the specific purposes it serves can be coded according to the same categories in both spoken and mediated settings and across languages. My findings validated these claims, showing that in my data the main function of the laughing character 'w' is to show dis/affiliation by creating common ground with the target or, more frequently, purposefully displaying aggression or claiming superiority over others – two functions highly salient but relatively infrequent elsewhere.

These results suggest that written laughter in the form of the character 'w' may have originated from a representation of laughter in co-present settings, but on Channel 5 it has now developed into 'a form of emotional expression that now has no possible spoken equivalent' (McCulloch, 2020, p. 121). Another striking feature of written laughter is related to what elicits laughter. In my data, written laughter refers almost exclusively to parts of the same post it is embedded in (producer laughter), rather than to something previously posted by someone else (recipient laughter). This is a remarkable difference from what was observed in previous studies on spoken varieties of English and may be related to the mediated setting and/or the combative nature of the forum. Most importantly, it signals that written laughter is very often used strategically to do intricate face-work, hence it is very different from the unplanned and spontaneous laughter studies on co-present settings have focused on. The very limited size of the sample analysed does not allow for generalisations, and whether these tendencies are context- and/or culture-specific, or apply to languages and varieties other than those considered here, and if so to what degree, are questions worth further investigation. Other issues that await research are how written laughter affects the recipient(s)' reactions, how the positioning of written laughter within the utterance affects meaning, and whether my findings apply to other forms of written laughter (e.g., emoji).

One thing at least is clear: laughter *does things* – insult, persuade, trigger both negative and positive emotions, promote, or hinder, ideas, etc. This study revealed important context- and possibly language-specific differences, but it also showed that CADS methods and taxonomies can be applied across discourse types, modalities and languages, hence promoting replicability and comparison. Conversely, the systematic analysis of languages other than English can contribute to CADS research both theoretically and methodologically.

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## Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Appendix

The annotated concordance corpus and additional material are available on the Author's Open Science Framework page, or at the following link: [https://osf.io/ac3jy/?view\\_only=755bda52e6314596b3bc155338f4e4fe](https://osf.io/ac3jy/?view_only=755bda52e6314596b3bc155338f4e4fe)

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