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'THAT'S DEPRESSING, LOL': HUMOR MARKERS IN THE SELF-ADDRESSED DISCOURSE OF FUTUREME LETTERS

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Abstract

This article examines humor as a cognitive and pragmatic resource in asynchronous self-addressed digital discourse, focusing on publicly available letters written on the FutureMe.org platform. A corpus of 3,426 English-language letters sent by users to their future selves was compiled and searched for four widely used humor markers, *lol*, *haha*, *hehe*, and *lmao* (along with their spelling variants). The resulting 652 concordances were manually annotated to determine whether these markers generally index humorous intent or specifically signal amusement at the communicative incongruence inherent in addressing a future self. Drawing on incongruity-based theories of humor, the study conceptualizes the FutureMe letter as a genre that simultaneously presupposes an addressee and challenges the epistemic conditions typical for epistolary communication. The results indicate that 11.7% of all humor-marker occurrences explicitly accompany reflections on the paradoxical status of the addressee (being both Self and Other), revealing humor's role in managing conceptual fuzziness. It has also been found that *lol*, *haha* and *lmao* signal humorous effect (laughter) more often than *hehe*. Qualitative analysis further discusses three primary functions of humor markers: (i) indexing amusement at the strange, playful incongruity of writing to oneself across time; (ii) signaling or reinforcing a joke; and (iii) mitigating excessively grave, emotional, or face-threatening content. The findings suggest that humor in these letters serves less as a reaction to situationally humorous content and more as a pragmatic device for stance adjustment under atypical communicative conditions. By foregrounding humor's role in resolving genre-based and epistemic incongruities, the article contributes to research on digital communication, humor pragmatics, and stance in self-addressed discourse.

Key words: *humor marker, self-addressed discourse, incongruity, computer-mediated discourse, stance.*

1. Introduction

While the functions of humor range from laughter and social bonding to relieving tension and managing ambiguity or uncertainty, the latter comes into focus in the case of self-addressed letters, highlighting how humor markers help discursive agents to manage the tone of written discourse and adjust their stance.

This study focuses on the letters that users posted on the FutureMe platform. A corpus of 3,426 publicly available self-addressed letters was collected from the FutureMe.org website in 2023. These are letters addressed by the users to themselves, which the program allows to write, store, and program to be sent to an indicated email at a certain moment in the future. After receiving one, many users

choose to publish these “letters from their past selves” online in public access. With the topics raised in these letters ranging from reassuring and supportive comments to pessimistic or sarcastic self-deprecation, the letters written to the future are humorous enough, the authors including jokes or written markers of laughter. Arguably, humor helps the writers to deal with the non-standard communicative situation of addressing the self asynchronously on the one hand, and on the other hand, humorous stance allows writers to both tone down the excessively serious discourse of talking about life milestones and mask their preoccupation with allegedly trivial matters.

An analysis of the humor markers in self-addressed digital letters to future allows one to develop insights into the cognitive and pragmatic dimensions of humor. This asynchronous written self-addressed discourse features a unique communicative situation, in that the intended recipient is the author’s self in the future. The implications of such communicative context on the construal consist in the author’s fairly precise understanding of the recipient’s knowledge, values, and experiences except for some upcoming ones that are yet unknown to the author. Arguably, this results in a fuzzy construal with an uncertain conceptualization of the recipient who is the Self and the Other at the same time. In turn, the genre restrictions of a letter force a scheme with an author and a recipient onto this discursive practice, prompting the authors to turn to the means of overcoming an uncomfortably ambiguous situation by the means of humor.

The *aim* of this study is therefore to analyze to what extent humor serves as a means of overcoming conceptual fuzziness and the dual construal of the addressee in letters addressed to oneself in the future.

To achieve this aim, the following *objectives* were established: i) to retrieve concordances with the markers signaling humor (teasing and irony inclusive)—*lol*, *haha*, *hehe*, and *lmao* and ii) manually annotate them to establish what fraction of these markers signal humorous or ironic response specifically to the uncomfortable construal of this communicative situation (addressing the imaginary self in the future).

2. Theoretical underpinnings of the approach

2.1. Humor theories underpinning the interpretation of results

For this study of written humor markers, following Attardo (2020, p. 3), I depart from a definition of humor as an umbrella-like term for the stimulus, an understanding of mirth/amusement as a characteristic of the emotional response, and laughter as a physical response to the stimulus.

The classical theory of incongruity postulates that humorous effect is based on the cognitive response resulting from betrayed semantic expectations (Attardo, 2020, p. 81-82). In relation to FutureMe letters, incongruity can be traced to the very communicative situation set-up, with writers’ finding it amusing to be addressing the “unknown self,” the self in the future, a stranger while also a perfectly known themselves. Arguably, this results in their expressing this amusement by including humor markers with the explicit comments on the paradoxical communicative situation.

The users of the FutureMe platform write letters, a form that by genre presupposes an addressee different than Self, with a different world knowledge. In turn, the fact they send it to themselves and that the letters will be received some time in the future creates a conflict between the classical epistolary genre and the real communicative situation. Incongruity can be conceptualized with different levels of specificity (Attardo et al., 2024), which allows to model a betrayed expectation of the whole communicative situation dictated by its genre conventions, as a source of incongruity. As a result, the genre conventions typical for letters such as asking questions, sharing news, and addressing the receiver, are challenged by the fact that the response will not be possible, on the one hand, and will yet be received by the author themselves when they read the letters. This way, the questions lose the pragmatic sense, and basically are written to be read in the future with a thought “what worried me X years/months ago.” Arguably, this flipped situation amuses the writers, prompting them to write those letters in the first place, the whole purpose being “asynchronous introspection” rather than communication.

As a cognitive development of the notion of incongruity, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) (Attardo & Raskin, 1991) is based on the conflicting scripts as the engine of humor. The opposing REAL VS. UNREAL is the basic opposition, and the clashing scripts create a cognitive effect that requires resolution and stimulates laughter (Attardo & Raskin, 1991, p. 337). As for letters addressing oneself in the future, there is a major script conflict in being both the writer and the perceived addressee, which results in amusement at the mere set-up of the communicative situation, prompting the usage of laughter markers to accompany seemingly non-humorous passages.

Finally, humor transaction scheme involves perception or creation of an amusing stimulus that the person (author) then tries to communicate to the others (Davis & Hofmann, 2023), and humor may be perceived as a communicative event (Attardo, 2020, p. 95). In the case of letters addressed to the future self, two considerations emerge: firstly, the main addressee is the authors themselves in the future, which is not a standard communicative situation; at the same time, the authors may be aware that in the computer-mediated context of the FutureMe website, there is an option of publishing this letter for everyone online to see, so the humorous effect may be designed to amuse both the primary addressee and other people who can potentially see it. Therefore, there is an imaginary addressee in these letters, supported by the default of the epistolary genre, even though the identity of the addressee is fuzzy in writers' perception.

2.2. Classification and functions of the orthographic humor markers

Markers of humor, including both acoustic and orthographic ones in written texts, are categorized as a means of identifying humorous intent (Attardo, 2015, p. 182). Attardo (2000, p. 7) suggests a divide between markers (elements signaling humorous intent or effect), and factors (constitutive elements of humor). Essentially, markers accompany the means that bear humorous intent, but do not alter the stimulus. However, as observed in some studies as well as in my data, humor markers like *lol*, *haha* may not necessarily signal humorous intent and may have a wider range of discursive functions bordering humorous stance.

In computer-mediated English, punctuation and emoticons have substantial semantic weight (Lucey, 2013; Walther & D'addario, 2001). Exclamation marks and punctuation emojis bear the emotional and tone-related information and can alter the message profoundly. General "playfulness" of digital writing can be expressed in the following ways (Danet, 2010; Lockyer, 2018): reduplicated punctuation marks or phonemes, non-standard spelling, capitalization, acronyms, shortenings, and abbreviations, meta-discursive descriptions speaker's reactions, emoji, and onomatopoeias. A more concise classification of humor-signaling typographical markers in written computer-mediated discourse includes as punctuation, formatting, emoticons, laughter (textual and acronym, e.g. *lol*, *haha*, *hehe*), and explicit comments (e.g. "kidding!") (Adams, 2012). According to Burgers and Van Mulken (2017), by using these markers, speakers make up for the means that are lacking in digital communication compared to face to-face communication and verbalize their paralinguistic responses. These responses may include laughing, smiling, or demonstrating a not-so-serious stance by facial expression or body posture. Lucey (2013) points out that it is especially relevant for communication through messages as the facial expressions and body language are unavailable to convey these meanings, and the "enhanced potential for interpretative failure" (Gal et al., 2020) prompts the communicants to turn to markers that can signalize their stance.

LOL appeared in digital communication as an acronym for "laughing out loud," but it has become lexicalized (which is reflected in its spelling *lol* and its applicability in the contexts where "laughing out loud" is not allegedly presumed, but *lol* serves for tone adjustment, making it a discourse marker) (Markman, 2013). It is used as a standalone utterance as well as at the beginning or at the end of the utterance (Markman, 2013). It can also occasionally be heard in live conversations (Zabotnova & Bohdanova, 2018). In addition, *lol* and *haha* may serve to soften the discomfort from a perceived mistake (Lockyer, 2014); similarly, Baron (2004) found that *lol* can serve to soften face-threatening acts, as well as *heehee* (or *haha*), rendering the message of "it's okay, alright" rather than humorous intent or reaction, developing the characteristics of phatic fillers.

Some researchers also approach *lol* and *haha* as interjections (Lockyer, 2018). Indeed, interjections in English are considered as a vehicle of emotion (Lockyer, 2018), and similarly, *lol* and *haha* may adjust the emotional tone of an utterance. In a similar perspective, despite it being an acronym, “Lol” is held to be acontextual marker and not to have a stable semantic content (Schneebeli, 2020). According to a study on *lol* in YouTube comments (Schneebeli, 2020), clause-final *lol* most often performs an expressive function signaling amusement and a socio-pragmatic function conveying alignment.

Lockyer (2018) distinguishes between primary emotive interjections (e.g. *whoa!*), cognitive interjections (e.g. *aha!*), conative interjections (e.g. *(shh!; hop!)*), secondary emotive interjections (e.g. *LOL, hell!*), contact interjections (e.g. *hello! sorry!*), and descriptive and onomatopoeic interjections (e.g. *haha, thud!*). Secondary emotive interjections, to which *lol* can be classified, overlap extensively with exclamations and discourse markers (Lockyer, 2018).

I approach *lmao* from a similar perspective as *lol* is regarded: it is initially an abbreviation (“laughing my ass off”), that became lexicalized and lost capital letter spelling, and may also appear in cases where the full phrase would be semantically awkward. Therefore, it also performs the functions of a pragmatic marker adjusting stance to a less serious and/or a phatic filler.

Similarly to *lol*, the onomatopoeic *haha* (and its variants such as *hehe*) can serve as ways to check on the status of the interaction and prove to the interlocutor that the relationship is still positive (Lucey, 2013). *Haha* may hence perform a function similar to the role of *lol* in communication, demonstrating that the speaker is positively-minded and/or does not commit to the utterance too strongly in order not to infringe of the interlocutor’s discursive face.

So, I argue the functions *lol*, *lmao*, *haha* and *hehe* can be roughly divided into the cases where these markers signal humorous intent that is evident or not evident from the utterance itself, and the cases where these markers serve to soften the meaning of the utterance by setting a certain playful emotional tone without an intention to stimulate laughter.

3. Methods and corpus design

The corpus of 3,426 self-addressed letters was created in April 2023 by using letters from the FutureMe.org platform. Only the letters that the users decided to publish in open access on the website were available and used for the corpus.

The corpus was created semi-automatically. First, the sitemap generating software (Sitemap Creator 5.4 by Inspyder Software, trial version) was used to compile an XML list of all links from the website. Then, the links to pages with letters were manually filtered from this list. This new list of useful pages was uploaded to a parsing application (Octoparse 8, trial version) that automatically extracted the texts of the letters as well as the dates the letters were written and then received. No demographic information on the users was either available or registered. At the final stage, the resulting corpus in XML format was manually cleaned for blank cells, scrambled encoding, and other languages than English.

The whole corpus was then processed using AntConc software with the queries *lol*, *haha*, *hehe*, *lmao*. The extracted concordance lists with the context window of 25 items on the left and on the right were manually annotated in Excel to establish if the marker accompanies an explicit amusement at the incongruence of the communicative situation, where the addressee is the author themselves in the future.

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
letter_4.txt	are still together right? Have you gotten to hang out yet? has he kissed you yet?	lol.	I just realized hes pretty prude. Did you get that whole problem fixed or did you
letter_4.txt	id to use correct grammar and punctuation and spelling when I write to myself?	lol!	Did Alex ever talk to Jesse about the situation? So did you ever figure out how C
letter_4.txt	he asked you to do that. Jesse came up and said he got 4 detentions that day.	lol!	Someone isn't doing her job! You gotta whip him into shape. Chop chop!
letter_54.txt	in 15, 2021, Dear FutureMe, i just found this website so i hope you get this letter	lol.	but anyways just keep your head up bc i think by now you graduated highscho
letter_72.txt	Jul 17, 2018, Jan 24, 2019, Dear FutureMe, happy birthday. We must eat all the ??	lol.	So how dose it feel. You know turning 13 and all. Did we getta better phone? Pre
letter_95.txt	back against it watching your little sister complain about the expire lemon juice,	lol.	Okay well I m gonna sent this to you, don t get murdered at work K!! U tried se
letter_122...	keep your parents trust through all the stuff you did that they don't know about	lol.	I like that you're dad's favorite child I like how hard you fought to not type out t
letter_126...	it made you feel funny... like idk youll know what im talking about cuz your me!	lol.	i do not forget ty and i think hes visiting again duringsummer. which brings me
letter_126...	hour from Lyons. guess what?! I DID TOO! (well again i guess..) from Lyons too!	lol.	that really makes me laugh . awh im kinda sad. as i type im kinda cheating and k
letter_126...	cheating and looking at the keys and my fingers ARE NOT resting on home row!	lol:	blech sal is still on my nerves and she likes wyatt and gets mad and comes over
letter_126...	hard. and colters a creeper. he makes me feel all yucky uncomfortable like.. eww.	lol.	but today i regestered for gilbert! im excited! and CJ got a pitiful truck! haha i ho
letter_200...	Oof idk what else to say uh.. ree? And go to futureme.org to write another one	lol.	
letter_211...	ave you gotte a girlfriend yet? i know that would b hard but it could be a secret	lol.	i just dot wanna be lonely. have you kissed someone yet at least. if you havent y
letter_221...	es 2 (in the future of course) and btw i think im still gonna b liking the same ppl	lol.	imma beeeeeee

Figure 1. A fragment of the concordance search for *lol* in AntConc

As observed by Attardo (2015, p. 183), corpus methods and quantitative techniques are promising in humor studies to allow for the extraction of certain statistical data on humor communicative behaviors, so this study departed from a corpus-based inquiry that was then interpreted in a qualitative description.

4. Results

The results of the annotation for humor markers expressing amusement at the communicative situation where the addressee is the same as the author, but asynchronously, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Manual annotation results for humor markers *lol, haha, hehe, lmao**

	Total	Amusement at the communicative situation incongruence	%
<i>lol</i> (<i>LOL, Lol, lolz, lolol, Lolooolol</i>)	325	40	12.3%
<i>haha</i> (<i>hahaha, ha ha, bahahaha, ahahaha</i> , and various combinations of upper and lower case)	199	23	11.6%
<i>lmao</i> (<i>LMAOAOAOAO, lmaoooo</i> , and other combinations of upper and lower case)	85	10	11.8%
<i>hehe</i> (<i>ehehe, hehehe, heh</i> , and various combinations of upper and lower case)	43	3	7%
All markers	652	76	11,7%

*A technical remark for Table 1: For *lol*, the initial search returned 359 hits, among which 34 were excluded because of a different language of repeating content, leaving 325 annotated cases in total. For *haha*, the initial search returned 262 hits, among which 63 were excluded because of a different language of repeating content, leaving 199 annotated cases in total. For *lmao*, the initial search returned 87 hits, among which 2 were excluded because of a different language of repeating content, leaving 85 annotated cases in total. For *hehe*, the initial search returned 53 hits, among which 10 were excluded because of a different language of repeating content, leaving 43 annotated cases in total.

As shown in Table 1, the highest percent of cases where the humor marker accompanies an expression of amusement or bewilderment at the situation where the addressee is the author themselves is found in *lol*. This percent is close for *haha* and *lmao*, but is lower for *hehe*.

5. Discussion

Following the quantitative results that indicate a large fraction of humor markers associated with the amusement at the communication situation of addressing a letter to self, three main functions of humor markers (*lol*, *haha*, *hehe*, *lmao*) in FutureMe letters were described: i) expressing amusement at the explicit incongruence of the communicative situation, where the addressee is the author themselves in the future; ii) signaling humor or joke, hence actually rendering *laughter*; iii) toning down the seriousness of the subject and reaffirming a positive/ironic stance.

5.1. Humor markers accompanying comments at the author-addressee confusion

The group of humor markers that stands out is the markers that accompany explicit comments on the incongruence of the communicative situation of sending a letter to the future self, where the sender is at the same time the receiver. Such cases account for 11,7% of all markers in total, with the fraction being comparably similar for *lol* (12.3%), *haha* (11.6%) and *lmao* (11.8%) and lower for *hehe* (7%), highlighting its more sarcastic than humorous usage. For example:

(1) *I'm so interested to see how you're doing. It's so weird writing to myself. lol*

(2) *Me..... hi there? how's the pandemic going? has it ended? Am I 10 years old? (probably lol) Anyways, how are my future friends... family... other. lol, - your past self*

In (1) and (2), the writers express amusement that they are writing to themselves and resort to an economical means of making their stance good-natured, the marker *lol*. It is not signaling or accompanying an explicit joke, but rather amusement without laughter.

Humor can reside in “cognitively refreshing, creative and thus amusing” content or linguistic expression as opposed to the conventional (Chłopicki, 2017, p.148). Indeed, the authors of letters published on the FutureMe platform demonstrate their interest and amusement at the whole idea of writing such a letter and sending it to the future. It might not be the funny elements that prompt their usage of the humor markers like *lol* or *haha*, but also their perception of this communicative event as a creative, cognitively challenging one.

The users also reflect on the genre of the letter and point out how it is not actually a letter in its typical genre understanding, but they treat it like one:

(3) *probably reading this in the future like 'why did i think it was a good idea to write so many questions like i could reply', lol.*

In (3), *lol* accompanies a comment on how questions are pointless in a letter to one's future self because no answer is possible, and yet the epistolary genre dictates asking them, and pragmatically-wise, the questions become an engine of reflection for the reader in the future, implying that it is what interested their past self.

The users also add the marker when reflecting on the genre of the letter that is closer to the diary (in (4) and when choosing the appropriate grammatical tense becomes confusing because the actions and events that are in future for them will be the past for the reader (in (5):

(4) *This is my only way to cope now. Its like my diary now lolol hope your okay now dude, I hate it here still. I wish things were back to what it used to be*

(5) *hope you continue to keep soccer in your life because you love that. also **im not sure what tense i should be writing in but lol its whatever.** remember to love yourself and be kind to others, and have fun when you can.*

Similarly to *lol*, *haha* and *lmao* are used to accompany comments on how the user is confused or perplexed by the dual nature of the addressee, who is the Other and the Self at the same time in this asynchronous communication setting:

(6) *depressed or tired or anything of that sort, please cheer up. I want you to, k? **So do it, just for me, just for yourself[haha, get it?] I'll always be here for you ;]** Much love, PastRachael*

(7) *Dear FutureMe, Hey gis it's me yourself **lmao.***

In (6) and (7), the pronouns are the source of humorous play for the users, as they are not sure if they should address the recipient as a different person or use “myself” or “yourself” when introducing themselves, and the humor markers serve to highlight the humorous intent.

Taken together, these examples show that humor markers do not just accompany joke that presuppose laughter or signal that the stance shifts to a more playful, but serve a broader construction of genre and identity. By marking the strangeness of addressing oneself across time, writers manage an inherently dissonant communicative event. The markers help to briefly flag the incongruence in discourse, this way re-establishing a cognitive control over the conceptualization and mediate the epistemic tension that is unique to asynchronous self-address.

5.2. Humor markers rendering laughter

In turn, the cases where the humor markers signal laughter can be generally divided into two groups: accompanying an explicit joke or showing the humorous intent of an utterance that is otherwise not explicitly humorous. For example:

(8) *remember, you are a freeking good looking guy, hell, i'm amazed tht guys dont start telling you how you caused them to become gay!! **lol***

In (8), the self-assurance is clearly humorous, with an exaggeration and a speculative scenario, as well as with the punctuation (the exclamation marks), and the marker *lol* serves to reinforce the humorous intent, especially given that the written form does not allow for face expression or tone, requiring compensation.

(9) *Is it better now? How do you see your future? Are you working hard or hardly working? **haha.***

In (9), there is wordplay – “working hard” and “hardly working” accompanied with a marker of laughter *haha*.

Similarly, the author give themselves funny recommendations and make the support they send to themselves into the future light-hearted, warming it with jokes:

(10) *be proud, sweetie. Look them in the eye and know you're beautiful and they're ugly. **And imagine them on the loo!! Haha!!** Now they're not so scary, are they?!*

Similarly to *haha* and *lol*, *lmao* may either accompany a joke (examples (11) and (12)) or signal that otherwise serious utterance has humorous effect (13)):

(11) *of the Mandir, and that too, every single time! So hopefully, you have a bomb fashion sense, fingers crossed that you're the next supermodel **lmao.***

In (11), the writer is apparently exaggerating for the humorous effect, and includes *lmao* to make the intention clearer.

(12) *i hope so how is school are there now zombies??? you know like from COVID19 or is there a different virus turning people into zombies lmao*

Similarly, there is an exaggeration in the writer's question about Covid, bringing it to the point where people are turned into zombies, and this imaginative comment is turned into humorous one by including the *lmao* marker.

(13) *end it all because daddy knows how much it means to you. Remember Dre? How you broke his heart? Yeah you belong to the streets lmao. Being 16 was not easy so I hope as an 17 year old...some things have changed for the better.*

In (13), the writer accompanies the comment that they "belong to the streets" with *lmao*, signaling the illocutionary force of the utterance as not completely serious or at least too cliché to be serious.

(14) *go makeup to her rn omg she is your biggest supporter and she loves you so much. I hope u don't have wrinkles yet lmao. Love u bae ;)*

In (14), the writer jokes about the wrinkles, again exaggerating the age difference between their sending the letter and them receiving it, and underlines the intent with *lmao*.

Finally, *hehe* is scarcer in the sample and shows some specific usage. It can accompany a joke, such as in (15), where it appears to signal the humorous intent of the question about the time machines not meant as a serious one. In the same passage, the author also jokes about "sending a letter back" into the past:

(15) *What awards have you won now? At this point I have only won 1 (the ACSC State Champion Medal). Have they invented time machines yet? (hehehe) You could send me a letter back! (just kidding) I am currently 13 and in year 8A. Got to go, sorry! See Me, Jonathan Sala*

There are also cases where "half-jokes" are accompanied by humorous markers and the utterance are not completely unserious but funny because something "silly" is said out loud:

(16) *take care live life and no matter what ur going through it's okay also this holloween be a slytherin a girl one for draco lol or Harley Quinn wtevr byeeee loser luv ya love y so much ??????????from Maria p.s eat the takis cream cheese and jalapeño lol*

Beyond the humor marker itself, the user in (16) additionally adjusts stance through lexical choices (*loser, luv ya*), exaggerated enthusiasm, rapid topic-shifts, and the succession of affectionate closings, performing informality. This pragmatically hybrid tone combining a supportive message with some teasing or ironic self-commentary is also characteristic of the self-addressed digital discourse. It is not quite possible to say if there is laughter in such cases signaled by *lol, lmao or haha/hehe*, and its functions develop a stance-marking turn rather than humor-signaling, bringing us to the next group of humor marker usage I discuss in the next section.

5.3. Softening the "excessively grave" stance

In many cases across the sample, humor markers accompany utterance that cannot be deemed funny and produce laughter even if the stance is good-natured/ironic. For instance:

(17) *Today we were supposed to see someone but he bailed on us and it kinda hurt. I realized that I still have feelings for him lol.*

There is no laughter in this example, but the author uses the humor marker *lol* to soften the seriousness of this utterance, also using a hedge (*kinda*) in the phrase *it kinda hurt*.

Another example, (18), features the author complaining about school being stressful for them and concluding that they stopped aiming for the top, putting up with the bare minimum, and adding *lol* twice in the passage to correct the excessively serious (in their perception) stance:

(18) *I dont know now lol schools stressful and i used to Aim for the top and now i barely aim for the passing grade. Lolol*

From the point of view of the classical pragmatics, these examples are face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that are politely masked as less serious (less threatening to the author's face, in this case) and hence less socially risky, with humor markers serving this purpose. Humor markers are effective as such "stance adjustments" (Yang et al., 2025), primarily because they are short and do not require much effort when expressing or processing, yet their use and positioning may change the perceived stance of the utterance quite significantly.

For example, in (19), the author writes in a warm, supportive tone, and then feels the need to shift the stance into a less serious one and add "lol" to signal that they realize that could sound "mushy", in their own terms:

(19) *please PLEASE don't mess up anything. Please don't give up on your goals! I know that sounded mushy so I'm sorry lol.*

In some topics, it appears that the authors feel that the words they use are too strong, and want to cool the dramatic effect down with humor markers:

(20) *I hope I get like a 4 or 5 on my AP exam for Euro. If not, then that's depressing lol.*

Haha appears in similar contexts as well, used to make the things said out loud sound less grave and serious, while they are not "laughter-funny":

(21) *work for living and my parents were the once who sustain our living. He is handsome as an angel and I don't look good HAHHAHA I do accept my physical appearance and I am contented of what I look like but I am still hoping for a glow up.*

The range of stance variations rendered by these markers is wide. When addressing the self in the future, authors may resort to playful teasing, like one could lightly tease a friend:

(22) *Did you make friends? Do you still talk to Justice, Alivia, Jasmyn, and Kyra?? You better lol. I hope you're happy and I hope you are living life in a way that makes you feel fulfilled and loved.*

Such teasing is often indexed with the humor markers that "tone down" a risky question and showing that it is exaggerated in the writer's perception:

(23) *film thing. Did you get it? If not, that's okay. There'll be more chances. How about your job? Did they fire you yet lol.*

In other cases, humor markers follow rather depressive comments, quite dark emotionally, and hence the humor markers show that the writer does not say it with sadness at the moment but rather with some perceived distancing from it through humor:

(24) *Even when you say "I hate myself" Just wait till you get this and cry your eyes out (lol) and get those tattoos to plz mami wont mind (she will kill u but go for it lollllll)*

(25) *ANYWAYS it's currently 4:45 am on June 26 and I feel like sobbing for now reason. It may just be hormones lmao.*

Grave, very serious utterances followed by humor markers can also be interpreted as life-and-death dichotomy-based jokes (Chłopicki, 2019):

(26) *Dear FutureMe, happy birthday lol ask clown if ur still friends with em who candice is :) also ru alive lol*

The perceived need to “soften” the risky turns in conversation (such as “*You suck at math lmao.*” in (27) is curious from the pragmatic point of view. An actual intersubjective communication requires that communicants save the social “face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987). When addressing the self, the writers reproduce the same norms as they are used to in intersubjective communication:

(27) *Dear [Name], please get better at math. You suck at math lmao. How much did you improve?*

(28) *Still miss your girlfriend? I definitely do now lmao.*

Similarly, from the point of view of “saving the face”, humor markers may accompany the utterances that authors deem too emotional and hence risking the imposition on the interlocutor:

(29) *how's jakarta. how's ur room, ur fa- agh sorry. we both hate the topic family. It's actually a sensitive topic for us hehe. your sis and bro? how are them?*

In these cases, their communicative behavior does not account for writing to self, but reproduces the norms of intersubjective communication. At the same time, such communication may not be absolutely intimate because the writers may not trust the technology enough or beware of the letters becoming public at some point.

Arguably, the habit of being rather dismissive towards own failures, anxieties, hopes and aspirations, is characteristic of the contemporary norms of social behavior and self-effacement in English-language discourses. People perceive being too serious (or *appearing* too serious) about their personal issues as an imposition on the audience or addressee, and this tendency is outstandingly visible in FutureMe letters.

Indeed, it is typical of the users to make fun of their own complaining, or just add humor markers alongside a serious negative claim to soften the stance. From the FTA theory point of view, this is a face-saving move to avoid imposition:

(30) *to love someone deeply, and i guess i almost did even tho i felt like thomas was more of an emotional dependance, not so healthy lol.*

(31) *Reality. Dreams are happy, theyre your fantasy. Or something like that. I wanna go back, go back home. Im scared of being attached now lol i hate everything.*

(32) *lol still single and depressed and currently jobless.*

In (30, 31, and 32) the users share personal emotionally-charged experience, opening up in the letters, and yet they apparently feel uncomfortable about doing it seriously and add humor markers with no joke to adjust the tone.

Similar stance-managing (or face-managing in pragmatic terms) strategy tends to accompany other strong feelings, not necessarily negative ones, so not only complaining but also emotional over-sharing is regarded as a “risky” discourse requiring softening with humorous markers:

(33) *how was sophie’s quinces? currently super excited for it lol :))*

(34) *Don’t forget to make time for yourself tho. Also don’t sell yourself sort. Love you lots. Never give up. Lol I just reread this and it sounds like I’m a basic white chick.*

In (34), the user sends advice and support to her future self, and then feels uncomfortable about it, adds *lol* and also reflects on this embarrassment by saying it sounded like she is “a basic white chick.” Another typical situation for letters to one’s future self will be the use of multiple available digital resources to adjust the stance and tone:

(35) *Heyy *chuckle filled with pain bc i dont got no friends* so.... how are you? I’m back again obviously. I write to u bc I ain’t got no friends. Anyways, so uhm where do u live rn? OH AND I FINALLY PAYED ATTENTION TO MY WHOLE MATHS LESSON THE WHOLE TIME. except for the fact I’m writing this at my math lesson right now =] kewl. Lil Levi supremacy is still alive =]]]]]]. Ioifhsohihwihw oh and i dont like school. It’s been decided long ago. Anyways you’ll be receiving a lot of this. Because I’m built different duh ?? and I’m lonely. Lol.*

In (35), the user resorts to meta-discursive comments (**chuckle filled with pain bc i dont got no friends**), punctuation means, contractions and abbreviations (*where do u live rn*), capital letters to imitate intonation, emoji (=]), a playful non-standard spelling of cool (*kewl*), and the humor marker *lol*. The fragment showcases the vast array of digital communication resources that serve the users to render the nuances of stance, ranging from serious and neutral to humorous, ironic, slightly playful or sarcastic.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that humor markers in FutureMe letters function as a strategic resource for navigating the epistemic and genre-based incongruities characteristic of asynchronous self-addressing discourse of FutureMe letters. In this communicative situation, the author and the addressee are nominally the same person but cognitively distinct as the “future self” is constructed as an Other with different knowledge, emotions, and circumstances, creating a non-standard conceptualization of the addressee that the writers must linguistically manage.

The corpus analysis with manual annotation of the concordances shows that while humor markers frequently accompany (or signal) conventional joking and playful exaggeration, a substantial fraction of these markers follow authors’ explicit amusement at the unusual communicative configuration in which writer and addressee coincide yet remain temporally and epistemically distinct. The findings reconfirm previous research on humor as a response to violated expectations and script clashes, underscoring that the basic incongruity at the heart of this genre, the addressee being the Self in the future, elicits discursive behavior aimed at reducing uncertainty, embarrassment, or excessive seriousness.

Beyond “marking laughter,” items such as *lol*, *haha*, *hehe*, and *lmao* emerge as flexible stance-management devices. They soften face-threatening self-disclosures and frame potentially uncomfortable (or too sentimental and serious) reflections with a playful tone. In this respect, humor markers allow writers to uphold the interpersonal norms of epistolary communication even when the interlocutor is, paradoxically, themselves. The persistence of such norms in self-directed discourse highlights the extent to which communicative habits are socially and cognitively ingrained.

Overall, the study contributes to humor pragmatics and digital-communication research by illustrating how humor operates not only to amuse but also to stabilize interpersonal alignment in discourse, especially in face-threatening situations. Future research may extend this line of inquiry by comparing self-addressed digital writing with other forms of introspective discourse.

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Declaration of competing interests

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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**'THAT'S DEPRESSING, LOL': МАРКЕРИ ГУМОРУ
В САМОАДРЕСОВАНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ ЛИСТІВ FUTUREME**

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Анотація

У статті розглядається гумор як когнітивний і прагматичний ресурс в асинхронному самоадресованому цифровому дискурсі на матеріалі листів, опублікованих на платформі FutureMe.org. Було зібрано корпус із 3426 листів англійською мовою, надісланих користувачами собі в майбутнє, та проведено пошук чотирьох широко вживаних орфографічних маркерів гумору: *lol*, *haha*, *hehe* та *lmao* (разом із їхніми варіантами написання). Отримані 652 конкордансів були вручну проанотовані, щоб визначити, чи вказують ці маркери на гумористичний намір загалом, чи конкретно сигналізують про гумор як реакцію на комунікативну інконгруентність, притаманну зверненню до майбутнього «я». Спираючись на теорії інконгруентності в гуморі, дослідження концептуалізує листи FutureMe як жанр, який одночасно і передбачає адресата, і ставить під сумнів епістемічні умови, типові для епістолярного спілкування. Результати показують, що 11,7% всіх випадків використання маркерів гумору явно супроводжують коментарі про парадоксальний статус адресата (який є одночасно і «Я», і «Іншим»), виявляючи роль гумору в управлінні концептуальним конфліктом. Також було виявлено, що *lol*, *haha* і

lmao частіше сигналізують про гумористичний ефект (сміх), ніж *hehe*. Якісний аналіз далі розглядає три основні функції маркерів гумору: (i) грайливе позначення інконгруентності адресатів у листі собі в майбутнє; (ii) сигналізування про гумористичний намір; та (iii) пом'якшення надмірно серйозного, емоційного або загрозливого для репутації змісту. Результати дослідження свідчать, що гумор у цих листах слугує не стільки реакцією на ситуативно гумористичний зміст, скільки прагматичним засобом для коригування постави в нетипових комунікативних умовах. Висуваючи на перший план роль гумору у вирішенні жанрової та епістемічної інконгруентності, стаття робить внесок у дослідження цифрового дискурсу, прагматики гумору та постави в автоадресованому дискурсі.

Ключові слова: *маркери гумору, самоадресований дискурс, інконгруентність, комп'ютерно-опосередкований дискурс, постава.*

Фінансова підтримка

Матеріал для цього дослідження (корпус із 3426 листів із платформи FutureMe.org) було зібрано у квітні 2023 року в рамках наукової роботи авторки під час отримання стипендії PAUSE, яку надає Колеж де Франс за підтримки французьких міністерств вищої освіти та досліджень, внутрішніх справ, Європи та закордонних справ, та культури.

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Авторка заявляє про відсутність конфлікту інтересів.