



Diana Livesey (Rose, PPE 1958) Prize

Ha ha

Ha ha. Hahahahahahaha. "Ha ha" is quite short, isn't it? It doesn't really *sound like* a whopping great cackle of laughter, does it? It's a little word, kind of clumsy, kind of awkward. And yet many of us use this word more than we actually laugh.

Its meaning is hard to pin down: we sometimes use it to express happiness, sometimes to show we're amused, sometimes to show contempt. I text you a photograph of a tabby cat wearing a sombrero; you reply, "Ha ha." How do I know whether or not you're really entertained; and if you are, whether you're amused by the photograph itself or just by the fact that I bothered to send it to you? Maybe the photograph had you in stitches; maybe you looked at it with a completely straight face. Or maybe you were amused by the photograph, but still didn't laugh out loud, smile even: you immediately condensed your amusement into a simple "ha ha".

I've found myself texting "ha ha", "LOL" (an acronym for 'laughing out loud'), even "ROFL" (an acronym for 'rolling on the floor laughing'), without actually laughing at all. Am I being duplicitous, pretending to be more entertained than I actually am? Sometimes. But there are also times when I am genuinely amused, and yet I don't laugh physically; when I want to tell you I found something funny, but to claim to be 'rolling on the floor laughing' would be a gross exaggeration. It's widely recognised that expressions such as 'LOL' and 'ROFL' are hyperbolic: people have started to use the terms ironically, a sure sign that their credibility is being called into question.

It's easy to lament the substitution of a stingy little word for an exuberant action, to hanker after a bygone age of laughter and joy. It's true that texting "ha ha" isn't comparable to having a good old belly laugh in the company of friends; that "LOL" doesn't do justice to the sound of laughter; that "ROFL" doesn't match up to the feeling of laughing. And it's sad to think that technology might be making us laugh less. But is it possible to express laughter in words without impoverishing it, without glossing over the fact that there are many different sorts of laughter; to put the physical and aural dimensions of laughter into writing? I'm bored of reading the words "haha", "LOL" and "ROFL" everywhere: what we need is a more varied, more sensory and more honest method for writing laughter.

There are two ways of writing laughter: imitation and description. "Ha ha" tries to imitate the sound of laughter; the acronyms "LOL" and "ROFL" attempt to describe the action of laughing. It's worth experimenting with both of these approaches to writing laughter, for there are times when we want to *express* our amusement, and times when we want to *write about* it.

"Ha ha" is onomatopoeic: the sound of the word appears to imitate the sound of laughter. It does, to a certain extent, succeed in doing this; but not all sorts of



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laughter sound the same, and why use the same word to represent such a great variety of sounds? In English, variations on the words "he he", "hee hee" and "tee hee hee" are occasionally used to refer to giggling, but our lexicon is still not adequately equipped for the representation of many sorts of laughter. In Turkish, each of the words "ha ha", "he he", "hi hi", "ho ho" and "kikir" denotes a different sort of laughter: while "hi hi" denotes a giggle, "ho ho" denotes a half-suppressed, scornful laugh. Would adding new words like "taha", "ahahaaha" and "tututututah" to our vocabulary make it easier to put our reactions into writing?

Or perhaps it's worth trying to represent laughter over longer sections of text: after all, when we laugh, we laugh *over a period of time*. Your laughter might get louder and quieter, faster and slower, which could be represented like this: "HAHAHAHAHHHA, ha ha hahaha, ha ha ha, hah... ha ha hahaha hahaha ha HA, HAHA". You might be speaking whilst laughing, delivering a scrambled mixture of verbal and non-verbal sounds, which could be represented like this: "a wahahahow, that's - boof - amazing-g".

Alternatively, we could focus on the physicality of the action of laughing. When you laugh wholeheartedly, you laugh with your whole body: the corners of your mouth turn up, your stomach muscles contract, you might even feel your legs tense. And so we could replace "ha ha" with: "my stomach muscles tightened, the laugh travelled up my body to my face, my cheeks filled out, a high-pitched noise came out of my mouth...". However, this scientific approach disregards the emotional import of laughter, and doesn't really capture what laughing *feels like*.

We can convey a variety of emotions in emails and text messages through the use of 'emoticons', representations of facial expressions formed with keyboard characters. However, we cannot adequately represent laughter with an image, because laughter is dynamic, energetic, a form of movement. It would make more sense to send video clips of laughter... but once again, we'd need a variety of video clips showcasing different sorts of laughter, from itsy-bitsy chuckles to ear-splitting peals of laughter. Besides, to really show how *you're* laughing, you'd need to send a video clip of *you*: styles of laughter vary enormously from person to person, and a video clip of someone else laughing says next to nothing about your personal response to a joke.

After exploring a number of possible methods for writing laughter, I'm still not satisfied. Each method is too systematic, too orderly, too restrictive. Creating a system for writing laughter seems fundamentally impossible: laughter is, by its very nature, playful, spontaneous, deviant. Language can't communicate laughter: laughter disrupts, transforms, undermines language. Let's not even try to invent a set of words for talking about laughter: to really write laughter, you've got to play with language yourself... "Taaaaah... whatthe-how-huhuhu-it'ss-sssss-kakkakaka-hehhehehe-hahhahattahatah! Trying to write-wru-hu-hu-ite... about lau-hugh-ugh-huth-ter... is imposseeble!"

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