# Exploring the Pragmatic Functions of the Acronym LOL in Instant Messenger Conversations

Kris M. Markman, Ph.D.
kris@krismarkman.com

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This paper employs both quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore the pragmatics of LOL in instant messenger (IM) conversations. Data were collected from 104 undergraduate students who engaged in both task-based and social IM conversations. Although LOL was initially an acronym for the phrase "laughing out loud," this paper provides evidence that suggests that LOL has become lexicalized (to lol) and can be understood as sharing characteristics typically associated with discourse markers. Several recurring patterns of lol usage are described, including the stand-alone lol, transmission-final lol, and transmission-initial lol. While lol was found significantly more frequently in social vs. task conversations, but there were no broad gender differences in lol usage. However, dyad composition (mixed-sex vs. same-sex) did significantly affect frequency of use.

## Exploring the Pragmatic Functions of the Acronym LOL in Instant Messenger Conversations

This paper investigates the use of the acronym "LOL" (henceforth lol) in college students' instant messaging (IM) conversations. Although lol is commonly held to be internet shorthand for the phrase "laughing out loud," this paper will provide evidence that lol is evolving beyond its initial function as an acronym. Specifically, I will present evidence that suggests that lol is emerging as a new type of discourse marker in online interactions.

Research on the usage of acronyms in IM is relatively rare, and generally focuses on frequencies of use. Baron (2004) examined gender and language use in college students' IM conversations. Although she found no gender differences in the use of lol or other acronyms or abbreviations, Baron found that lol was the most frequent acronym in her corpus, and furthermore noted that lol was "not always used to indicate the humorous response suggested by the words 'laughing out loud.' Rather, both lol and heehee (or haha) are commonly used as phatic fillers for the equivalent of OK, cool, or yeah" (p. 411). A similar argument was made by Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) in their study of Canadian teen IM conversations, where lol was the most frequently found acronym. However, Ling and Baron (2007) found relatively few instances of lol in both IM and text messaging conversations carried out by American college students.

While some scholars have suggested that lol has become lexicalized into a more general phatic expression (Baron, 2004; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008), Garley, Slade and Terkourafi (2009) posit that lol may be understood as having evolved into an uninflected discourse marker. Additional research has shown that paralinguistic elements available in computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as ellipses, can fulfill a variety of pragmatic and interpersonal functions beyond turn-taking (Ong, 2011). Similarly, Dresner and Herring (2010) have argued that emoticons can serve as indicators of illocutionary force apart from simply mapping facial expressions to text. In addition, previous research has found that the structural, linguistic, and paralinguistic features of IM and other CMC can vary based on whether the conversations are socially or task-oriented (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007; Maness, 2008; Riordan, Markman, & Stewart, in press). Therefore, the following research questions guide this analysis:

*RQ1: What are the pragmatic functions of 'lol' in IM discourse?*
*RQ2: Does the use of 'lol' in IM vary between social and task-based contexts?*

### Data and Method

Data for this paper come from a series of 104 IM conversations between undergraduate students ($N$=104, $M$ age = 20, 51 males) at a large university in the southern United States. Students were recruited as part of a larger study on alignment and argument in IM conversation. Participants were asked to bring a friend to the study, and pairs were recruited until there were roughly equal groups of same-sex (MM and FF) and mixed-sex pairs. Participants reported an average length of friendship of 42 months ($SD$ = 54, $Mdn$ = 24).

Each pair participated in two approximately 20-minute IM conversations: a social conversation and a task conversation. In the social conversations, participants were instructed to talk about whatever they wanted for the 20 minutes. In the task conversation, participants were assigned to opposing sides of a proposal to change printing fees at their university, and were instructed to try to persuade their friends to accept their assigned positions. Participants were given a set of sample arguments for their assigned positions to use to jump-start the conversations. After the participants were given the instructions, the researchers did not intervene in the conversations, in an attempt to capture as naturalistic data as possible. Screen capture software was used to record video of each participant's computer screen during the conversations, and text transcripts for each conversation were also saved. Data will be analyzed both quantitatively, and qualitatively, based on methods derived from Conversation Analysis.

## Preliminary Analysis

### Quantitative Results

There were a total of 562 uses of lol in the social conversations, and 155 uses of lol in the persuasive conversations. Females ($M$ = 7.98) used lol more than males ($M$ = 5.75), however these differences were not significant ($t(102) = -1.23$, $p = .22$). A mixed ANOVA (2 x 3 x 2) was conducted with conversation condition (social vs. persuasive) as the within-subjects factor and pair type (MM, FF or Mixed) and condition order (social first or persuasive first) as between-subjects factors (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Results confirm a significant main effect for conversational condition, such that participants used lol more frequently in the social conversation versus the persuasive conversations, $F(1, 98) = 53.671$, $p < .001$. Between-subjects analysis showed a significant main effect for pair type, $F(2, 98) = 6.588$, $p < .005$, but no main effect for the order in which the two conversations took place. There was an interaction effect between conversational condition and pair type ($F(2, 98) = 8.456$, $p < .001$) with mixed sex pairs using lol significantly more in the social condition than MM pairs, although FF pairs did not differ from either MM or mixed pairs. The interaction effect between pair type and condition order was not significant ($p = .06$).

Table 1.

*LOL Usage by Conversational Condition and Pair Type*

| | | Social Condition | | Persuasive Condition | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair Type | Condition Order | M | SD | M | SD |
| FF | Social First (n=20) | 4.45 | 3.86 | .80 | 1.20 |
| | Persuasive First (n=16) | 7.69 | 7.14 | 1.13 | 1.82 |
| | Total (n=36) | 5.89 | 5.71 | .94 | 1.49 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MM | Social First (n=18) | 3.11 | 3.74 | 1.72 | 2.93 |
| | Persuasive First (n=16) | 1.00 | 1.63 | .75 | 1.34 |
| | Total (n=34) | 2.12 | 3.09 | 1.26 | 2.34 |
| Mixed | Social First (n=14) | 9.79 | 10.56 | 4.43 | 6.78 |
| | Persuasive First (n=20) | 7.05 | 8.83 | .80 | 1.58 |
| | Total (n=34) | 8.18 | 9.52 | 2.29 | 4.78 |
| Total | Social First (n=52) | 5.42 | 6.79 | 2.10 | 4.16 |
| | Persuasive First (n=52) | 5.38 | 7.32 | .88 | 1.57 |
| | Total (n=104) | 5.40 | 7.03 | 1.49 | 3.19 |

**Qualitative Analysis**

Preliminary qualitative analysis reveals three recurring patterns of lol deployment in these data: as a stand-alone transmission unit (where a transmission unit (TU) is defined as a segment of text typed into the message composition box when enter/send is pressed), at the end of the TU, and at the beginning of the TU. The following sections present a brief discussion of each of these patterns of use.

**Stand alone lol.** Examples 1-4 illustrate the use of lol as a stand-alone unit in IM discourse. In these examples, lol functions primarily as a turn taking device.

Example 1 Pair 3 - Social

14:58:17 <F2> dude
14:58:20 <F1> yeah?
14:58:21 <F2> i was for it
➔ 14:58:22 <F2> lol
➔ 14:58:23 <F1> lol
14:58:28 <F1> man

Example 2 Pair 28 – Social

15:00:34 <F> lol you can use mine if you want, you can have more than one user on it. lol yeah this mac is pretty sweet, i kep messing up on this key board though..no
➔ 15:00:39 <F> lol

15:00:47 <M> oh ok, thats cool

Example 3 Pair 47 – Persuasive
12:31:29 <M> lol me 2
➔ 12:31:36 <F> lol.
12:32:13 <M> if this was passed then ppl would just stop doin thier work lol

Example 4 Pair 25 – Social
10:39:03 <F> i know you want to keep it i know when u got it that u was not wanti ng to give it back
➔ 10:39:18 <M> lol
10:39:34 <M> i want one for christmas

In IM conversations, participants do not have access to other nonverbal cues, such as laughter, that can potentially serve as turn taking devices in spoken interaction (O'Donnell‐Trujillo & Adams, 1983). Examples 1 and 3 most clearly illustrate how lol can be understood as a phatic filler (Baron, 2004) that serves as an acknowledgement of the prior speaker's turn by returning an affiliated response. In other words, one lol begets another. While some humorous valence may also be suggested by the use of lol, as opposed to 'okay' or 'cool,' none of the surrounding talk suggests situations that would warrant true "laughing out loud." A similar case can be made for example 4, where the male participant deploys a stand-alone lol as an acknowledgement of his conversational partner's humorous prior transmission. His lol then serves as a bridge to his next turn. The female participant in example 2 also uses lol as a turn taking device, but in this case, her lol is not in response to her partner's statement, but rather appears to be a continuation of her own prior turn. Thus the stand-alone lol can be used to pass the turn to the next speaker, or to (metaphorically[1]) hold the floor for the current speaker.

**Transmission-final lol.** In addition to serving as stand-alone markers, lol is frequently found in these data in a transmission-final position; that is, as the last thing typed into the message composition box.

Example 5 Pair 49 – Persuasive
➔ 16:49:16 <M1> It will reduce the amount of printing....lol
➔ 16:51:54 <M2> it will make us students feel as paying slaves to the University! lol
16:52:28 <M1> because students will only print what they are willing to pay for

Example 6 Pair 33 – Social
14:22:18 <F1> you laugh at everything!!
14:22:38 <F1> sooooooooooooo :)
➔ 14:22:41 <F2> you can hear me?! I kno!1 lol
14:22:43 <F1> how's life?

[1] It is not possible, strictly speaking, to hold the floor in IM conversations, because the technology allows both participants to type at the same time, and the ultimate order of transmissions in the IM window is determined by the server. However, in most IM clients, including the one used here, the system displays a type of presence awareness notification, either in the form of text (i.e. X is typing) or an icon that alerts the other party that their interlocutor is composing a transmission.

In examples 5 and 6 lol appears at the end of a TU, and notably after some form of punctuation. In example 5, M1 adds lol after a pause marker (Ong, 2011), whereas M2 ends his sentence with an exclamation point, but then includes lol at the end of the same TU. Similarly, F2 in example 6 adds lol after repeated exclamation points (the numeral 1 in this case can be understood as a typo, given that 1 and ! share the same key on standard keyboard layouts).

Example 7 Pair 47 – Persuasive

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 12:31:29 | <M> lol me 2 |
| | 12:31:36 | <F> lol. |
| ➔ | 12:32:13 | <M> if this was passed then ppl would just stop doin thier work lol |
| ➔ | 12:32:23 | <M> i think so lol |

Example 8 Pair 28 – Social

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 14:58:45 | <M> ooh yeah i forgot about that |
| ➔ | 14:59:14 | <F> yah, im going to busting out the rosetta stone this weekend lol |
| | 14:59:29 | <M> ha ok. I need to get that for my computer maybe... |
| | 14:59:38 | <M> dunno i think all my memory is full of music though |
| | 14:59:46 | <M> I need an external harddrive |
| ➔ | 14:59:50 | <M> or a fancy mac lol |
| | 15:00:24 | <M> can i borrow like...$2000? |

In examples 7 and 8 lol is used at the end of TUs that do not include sentence-final punctuation. It should be noted that the absence of standard punctuation (as well as capitalization) is common in IM conversations (Baron, 2008), so it should not be taken as a significant difference that TU-final lol can appear without a preceding punctuation mark. I propose that, in both cases of TU-final lol, lol does not serve as a phatic filler, but rather appears to take on a function more akin to tag questions such as "you know/y'know." Schiffrin (1987) has argued that y'know "is a marker of meta-knowledge which can be used to seek particular interactional alignments in arguments and narratives" (p. 309). In the case of TU-final lol, this preliminary analysis suggests that the meta-pragmatic function is not to mark information states, but rather to mark conversational valence. Similarly to y'know, lol can be used as a way to align to particular participation frameworks, in this case, humorous, playful, or less serious conversations. Thus while lol does not appear to be used to literally indicate the participant is "laughing out loud," its pragmatic function is derived from this initial literal meaning.

**Transmission-initial lol.** Finally I consider the case of lol at the start of a TU.

Example 9 Pair 28 – Social

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 14:57:49 | <M> i gotta do that japanese presentation...blurga |
| | 14:57:59 | <M> oh well shouldnt take too long |
| | 14:58:08 | <M> you should help me :3 |
| ➔ | 14:58:34 | <F> lol alrighty, im also going to prit off that study guide she sent us. |
| | 14:58:45 | <M> ooh yeah i forgot about that |

In example 9, the female participant deploys a TU-initial lol in response to a request from the male participant. Requests can be face-threatening acts (Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986), and accordingly, the male participant has ended his request with an emoticon, potentially as a way to soften the tone of the request. His partner's use of a TU-initial lol immediately preceding an agreement token can be understood as ratifying this participation framework, as with the TU-final uses of lol described above.

Example 10 Pair 10 – Persuasive

14:22:14 <M> now we should have the choice rather if we want paper at all noew t hat should be an arguement
14:23:20 <M> and yeah thats true thats why they should make it a choice
➔ 14:23:30 <F> lol yea we want paper! we NEED paper. some teachers require you p rint out stuff but most teachers tell you to turn your work in online anyway
14:23:53 <F> i know its true :)

Example 11 Pair 47 – Persuasive

12:31:13 <F> i guess you have a point, but I like my idea. It could work if it was pu t together right. Idk. I barely print stuff anyway.
➔ 12:31:29 <M> lol me 2
12:31:36 <F> lol.
12:32:13 <M> if this was passed then ppl would just stop doin thier work lol

Examples 10 and 11 illustrate other uses of lol coupled with agreement tokens. In example 10, the female participant's "lol yea" functions as part of an upgraded second assessment (Pomerantz, 1984), while in example 11 the lol can potentially be understood as a type of intensifier.

Example 12 Pair 25 – Social

10:34:51 <M> you lied
10:35:07 <F> about what
10:35:26 <M> you said this would be quick..lol
➔ 10:35:52 <F> lol no i didnt say that you never listen and it is quick u have nothing else to do

Finally, in example 12, the lol precedes a disagreement, a type of dis-preferred response (Pomerantz, 1984). Pomerantz shows that in these cases, the disagreement is frequently prefaced by an agreement token, such as "yes, but" or "well." I would argue that in example 12, the female participant's use of the TU-initial lol serves two functions: to align with the participation framework established by the male participant in his prior turn, and to soften the blow of the disagreement. In this regard, lol is similar to other discourse markers, such as "well" or "yeah."

**Other uses of lol.** The most common recurring patterns of lol usage in these data are the stand-alone lol, transmission-final, and transmission-initial lol, as discussed above. However, there are less frequent instances of other uses of lol in these data, particularly multiple uses of lol within a single TU, and use of lol medially in a TU, as opposed to at the beginning or end.

Additional analyses will be carried out on these other uses of lol to explore how the align with or depart from the previously identified functions of lol.

## Lol as an Emerging Discourse Marker

This abstract represents a preliminary analysis of the pragmatic functions of lol in IM conversations among undergraduate students, and explores the possibility that lol is emerging as a type of CMC-specific discourse marker. As multiple scholars have pointed out, there is no uniform consensus on the precise definition of discourse markers/pragmatic markers; in fact even the name for this phenomenon is up for debate (Brinton, 1996; Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin, 2001). While some definitions are more expansive (Schiffrin, 1987), others are more restrictive (Fraser, 1999). However, Brinton (1996) points out that there are a number of broad similarities among the different scholarly treatments of discourse markers. Specifically, she finds that expressing the relationship between sequential utterances, achieving conversational continuity, and serving as structural devices (i.e. marking chunks or units of a message) are among the most commonly identified pragmatic functions of discourse markers. This paper argues that lol, as found in these data, can be shown to satisfy all of these criteria, and thus can be understood as an emerging discourse marker in CMC. In particular, the uses of lol in these data are consistent with several characteristics commonly associated with discourse markers (Brinton, 1996), specifically: appearing in both sentence-initial and sentence-final positions; having little or difficult to specify propositional meaning; existing outside syntactic structure and having no clear grammatical function; and serving as optional rather than obligatory features of discourse. In addition, Brinton notes that discourse markers are "predominantly a feature of oral rather than of written discourse" (p. 33). While IM conversations are text based, research has shown that they have a number of features typically associated with spoken discourse, making them a type of hybrid between written and oral language (Baron, 2008). It is in this hybrid of oral and written language that lol is claiming its place in the category of discourse marker.

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