Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

JCaDS
JOURNAL OF CORPORA AND DISCOURSE STUDIES 2024, 7(1):233–257
E-ISSN 2515-0251

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE OF LAUGHTER AND GESTURES: EXAMPLES FROM THE SPOKEN BNC2014 AND DICKENS'S NOVELS

MICHAEL PACE-SIGGE
UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND

CITATION

Pace-Sigge, M. (2024). Presence and absence of laughter and gestures: Examples from the Spoken BNC2014 and Dickens's novels. *Journal of Corpora and Discourse Studies*, *7*(1):233–257

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with extra-linguistic discourse markers in different types of conversation. Specifically, it investigates the presence and absence of two ways to underscore the meaning a speaker tries to convey, namely *laughter* and the use of *gestures*, a corpus-assisted approach will be used to look at these two types of discourses. First, the (transcribed) natural conversations found in the Spoken BNC2014 and second, the conversations by fictional characters as found in the novels of Charles Dickens will be compared for this purpose. This paper looks, in its first half, at instances where laughter is used in spoken conversations and investigates how the presence or absence of laughter reflects either a marked functional section within a given discourse or can be seen as a particular marker within the discourse. The second half of the article will look at the presence or absence of gestures that appear as a way to underpin what is said in the fictional discourses found in the novels of Charles Dickens.

KEYWORDS

Spoken BNC2014; Dickens; laughter; gestures; corpus-assisted discourse analysis; conversations

CONTACT

Michael Pace-Sigge, Department of English Language and Culture, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, North-Karelia, 80111, Finland.
michp@uef.fi

DOI

10.18573/jcads.116

ORCID

0000-0002-5164-5242

ISSUE DOI

10.18573/jcads.v7

LICENSE

© The authors. Available under the terms of the CC-BY 4.0 license

Manuscript accepted 2024-04-05

Presence and absence of laughter and gestures: Examples from the Spoken BNC2014 and Dickens's novels

Michael Pace-Sigge
University of Eastern Finland

1. Introduction: Laughter in Corpora

Partington (2014; see also Duguid & Partington, 2018) notes how corpus linguistics appears to be primarily concerned with presence; this is clearly manifested in John Sinclair's (2004) dictum of a 'corpus-driven' approach to language studies which 'trusts the text'. When critically reviewing different forms of discourse this might, however, lead to the researchers turning a blind eye to the context and co-text within which these exchanges take place. Partington (2014) demonstrates how corpus linguistics is still a useful tool when it comes to detecting elements which are not visible on the surface of corpus material. Moreover, he indicates a number of categories of absence which can be looked for:

> …'known absence'...that is, some feature or behaviour we already know or suspect to be absent from a particular dataset (and which is therefore searchable) and 'unknown absence'...the serendipitous discovery during the course of research that some feature or behaviour is absent from something or somewhere. Of course, once an unknown absence is uncovered it becomes known and searchable...Another useful distinction is that that between the 'absolute absence' as opposed to the 'relative absence' of a feature or behaviour... (Partington, 2014, p. 122)

Going further, he describes how, in a corpus, absences might manifest themselves, namely by their 'absence from a limited set of texts, including from a specific portion of a corpus' (Partington, 2014, p. 123); absence from a particular part or position within the text and, finally, absence in the form of hidden meanings, which, by definition, is the hardest and probably most subjective to detect. Crucially, any absence can only be located when there is an awareness of what ought to be present. By comparing and contrasting relevant items which are present with those that are absent, an interpretation for such usages in a particular discourse can be attempted.

This chapter presents two case studies to indicate how the presence—or lack of it—of two extra-linguistic features provide crucial co-text markers in a chosen corpus that provide relevant pointers towards the context in which they occur. Multi-modal research in linguistics, cognitive studies, and psychological studies (see Section 2.1) have shown that, in spoken discourse, two key markers tend to be present in most situations: one is the use of laughter; the second is the use of gestures. Both are employed to underscore and clarify what is being verbally transmitted. The present article revisits work done by Partington (2006), who looked at laughter in a corpus of White House briefings. Here, the corpus in question will be the most recent comprehensive corpus of casual spoken British English, namely the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (Spoken BNC2014;

Pace-Sigge (2024) Presence and absence of laughter and gestures: Examples from the Spoken BNC2014 and Dickens's novels. DOI 10.18573/jcads.116

Love et al., 2017). The second case study looks at natural use of gesture in conversations as described by Gullberg (2006; Debreslioska & Gullberg, 2020 a, 2020b, 2022) in order to compare their findings to observe to what degree these are also present in highly descriptive fiction, namely, the works of Charles Dickens. The Dickens corpus (DCorp; Mahlberg, 2012) will be used here, and all analyses will be undertaken using WordSmith Tools 8 (Scott, 2023).

A final part of this work will show the link between laughter and gestures and how absences in different corpora can be addressed as part of a wider-reaching investigation. The two case studies highlight that corpora can do a lot more than simply indicate use of lexical forms and grammatical structures. A well-designed transcription corpus of spoken exchanges will give extra-lingual information like pauses and laughter—and the latter is investigated here as an essential part of inter-personal communication. Spoken corpora, unless these are multi-modal, do not, however, provide information about gestures; by contrast, novelists add descriptive information to their spoken exchanges on the relevant page. This makes them useful material for the second case study. Finally, this chapter will also show that, at least in the works of Dickens, we can find evidence that the whole communicative event—utterance, gesture and occurrences of laughter—is described.

2. Laughter in Corpora

2.1. Introduction: Laughter in Corpora

There have been a number of studies focusing on laughter occurrence patterns using corpora. Burger et al. (2008) as well as Nesi (2012) examine particular (semi-) formal spoken occasions (meetings, seminars and lectures); and Partington (2006, 2008, 2011) analyses in detail the use of laughter during White House briefings. That the extra-lexical data created during spoken utterances can be challenging has been described by a number of researchers, amongst them Truong and Trouvain (2012) as well as Brunner and colleagues (2017).

Bryant et al. (2016) show in their investigation that the sound quality of laughter is different for vocalisations amongst friends compared to vocal expressions amongst strangers. It is widely reported (amongst others, Devereux & Ginsburg, 2001 and Burger et al, 2008) that laughter is used to reduce potential tension during meetings. Moreover, a lot of research has been undertaken into gender-specific or social relation influenced laughter (see Devereux & Ginsburg, 2001, or Ludusan & Schuppler, 2022).

A study using the same material—the Spoken BNC2014—is by Hanks and Egbert (2022). Their findings highlight how crucial laughter is as part of a communicative event: '[t]his finding supports the idea that laughter serves various pragmatic functions beyond indicating humor and shows that the interlocutors use laughter strategically' (pp. 286-287). Crucially, 'laughter and the communicative purposes of discourse shape each other in conversation' (p. 287). The authors look at randomly extracted samples in order to present a fine-grained pragmatic analysis.

Section 2.2 addresses these issues with (1) a focus on the apparent lack of non-linguistic vocalisations in corpora that are transcripts of casual spoken British English and (2) based on the evidence available, it presents an investigation of when and how laughter occurs in informal conversations.

2.2. Background: Laughter in Corpora

Partington (2006, 2008, 2011) focusses on 'laughter-talk' in his corpus-assisted investigations. His 2006 book, being a corpus-assisted study of laughter-talk, provides a wide-ranging discussion of the relevant literature at the time. In his discourse analysis he focusses on the investigation of what precisely precedes recorded laughter in the corpora investigated. In other words, he presents research into what triggers laughter in the audience. For the corpus he uses, the target words are the explicit transcription 'laughter' as well as non-lexical transcription sections (for example 'he he he'). He finds that the use of classic jokes and puns is noticeably rare in the proceedings.

Partington (2006) demonstrates that, in the White House briefings corpus, laughter typically follows 'several kinds of sudden and deliberate shifts by speakers…These include...shifts of mode, from the transactional…to the interactional' (p. 226). There are two key techniques that Partington (2006 and 2011) describes which are used for the current study: firstly, using concordancing tools to extract the relevant lines in transcripts of spoken discourse; secondly, the use of the plotter tool in WordSmith Tools to pinpoint where, in the transcribed speech files, laughter itself occurs. Partington (2006) proposes a functional definition of laughter where he makes a clear distinction between speaker laughter and recipient laughter. This has been adopted by Hanks and Egbert (2022) as well. The latter, recipient laughter, is then further divided into affiliative and disaffiliative laughter.

Burger and colleagues (2008) describe how different types of non-lexical vocalisations, in particular, laughter, differ in length and intensity. Furthermore, Truong and Trouvain (2012) point towards another issue where laughter in conversation is concerned: 'differences in the duration and numbers of overlapping laughs between corpora, particularly between multi-party conversations and dialogues' (p. 20). The work by these authors differs qualitatively from the type of investigation undertaken by Partington. Whereas the latter relies on orthographical transcripts that merely record the occurrence of laughter, Burger et al. (2008), Truong and Trouvain (2012), as well as the groups of authors described below, focus on the actual type of laughter, looking at multi-modal source material, yet this does lack variation in context and situation.

Alsop and Nesi (2014) provide a recent investigation into the use of humour. Their data is corpus- and video-based and focusses on the English used during university lectures. While their paper aims to describe the need for pragmatic mark-ups, it is important to note that the format (lectures) and the topic (engineering) does not, on the surface of it, lend itself to an investigation of humour usage. Nevertheless, they recorded that 'disparaging or playful humour' appears to account for around 1% of the data. Brunner et al. (2017) found that their corpus of academic spoken English provides suitable material

for the study of how laughter is employed: 'A special case of paralinguistic transcription features as part of rich audio-visual data is laughter. It is by far the most frequently occurring type of all annotated features, but also the most complex in our data' (Section 3.1). They describe in detail how multifaceted the use of laughter is—resulting in a highly complex annotation required for all the different forms of laughter. It becomes fairly clear that a slow, multi-modal approach appears to be the only way to provide something that comes close to a comprehensive form of laughter tagging.

From Burger et al. (2008) onwards, research has highlighted the difficulty of annotating laughter in any type of transcript of spoken text. Their work is qualitatively very different from the approach taken by Partington, who uses the recorded occurrence of any laughter evidence to see how the discourse pattern triggered this occurrence. The latter is able to deal with a much larger trove of conversational exchanges. It is, therefore, far less dependent on circumstance.

This particular investigation will follow the methodology proposed by Partington (2011) as it has been judged to be the most suitable approach when dealing with third-party text corpora. It is, furthermore, a method that allows for processing a large number of spoken exchanges of a large number of different actors. Crucially, if laughter is found to be frequent in a rather formal setting, we can hypothesize that it will be found even more frequently in casual conversations—as in the oral history retelling of local stories or informal exchanges between friends, family and neighbours. A deeper analysis will show in how far such a hypothesis can be upheld in the light of the evidence found in the Spoken BNC2014.

2.3. Methodology: Laughter in Corpora

In order to investigate usage patterns around *laughter*, a British casual spoken corpus, in particular, the most up-to-date, comprehensive and UK-wide spoken corpus, the Spoken BNC2014 is investigated.

The research is split into several steps. Initially, the corpus has been checked for concordance lines including *laugh**; the Spoken BNC2014 has the occurrence of laughter tagged in XML format files and, as a consequence, the concordance lines where these tags occur are being calculated, using Wordsmith 8 (Scott, 2023). The second step is to review the concordance lines and expunge those where it is used as a lexical item (for example, 'he laughed his head off'). As a third step, near-collocates (L1 and R1) of the utterance marker are determined. A fourth step is to look at which point within their spoken turn a speaker employs *laugh**: whether it is turn-initial, turn-final or mid-turn. As a final step, the results obtained are correlated with details gathered from the plot tool and linked to any existing meta-data. An overview of a number of different corpora provides a first insight into how useful third-party corpora are for this type of investigation, because many exclude extra-linguistic information. This is not the case, however, for the most recent corpus of spoken British English, the 10,493,534-word Spoken BNC2014 has been designed to include, as tags, such spoken elements as overlap or laughter—see McEnery, Love and Brezina (2017) as well as the Spoken BNC2014 corpus manual (Love et al.,

2017) for details. As a result, both the size and regulated transcription for the tag *<vocal desc='laugh'/>* made this corpus the pivot of all further investigations.

2.4. Findings: Laughter in Corpora

In this Spoken BNC2014, the occurrence of laughter is, as predicted, high: it occurs nearly 102.5 times every 10,000 words (107,587 concordance lines). It is, in fact, not just the occurrence of laughter as a non-verbal element in the Spoken BNC2014. Speakers also make frequent reference to *laugh* lemma and its word forms *laughs*, *laughter* and *laughing* throughout their conversations, where these word forms appear 1,145 times – nearly 11 times every 1,000 words. Far more important is the fact that the *laugh* tag appears in 1,240 out of the 1,251 that make the Spoken BNC2014—in other words, 99.1% of all files record at least one occasion of laughter which highlights that this extra-vocal element is a natural, salient part of casual conversation. Indeed, Hanks and Egbert, in their 2022 research, said the most frequent reason for laughter in the Spoken BNC2014 can be described as 'joking around' (p. 286).

made that nut roast ? --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm it 's by people who
thing and just returned it within --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm no --UNCLEARWORD just put a
no it 's definitely his --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm okay I 'll just
that no that 's cheating --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm stop throwing the dice around
though they 've erm recruited --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm a guy who er used to play
this is just your face --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm do you reckon I should do
god oh but that 's --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm why do people wan na play
we are in --ANONplace are n't we ? --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> erm my last boyfriend was a b
n't --UNCLEARWORD what --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> especially when you pull that so
much harder no no no --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> especially when you 're you 're you
yep yep hot chocolate --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> especially yeah oh I 've never
they 're kind of a boy --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> even worse --ANONnameF boy boy
hates me turmeric on him --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> every time we Skype I recommend
get another job he was always --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> every time you know he got into
looks a little bit skinnier than --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> everyone was like what ?
like --UNCLEARWORD ? --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> everyone 's very --UNCLEARWORD do you
did it make you feel ? --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> everyone shut up shh shh
and two world wars --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> everyone always picks a nice place
fine --UNCLEARWORD can do it --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> everything 's under control --ANONnameF 's
that 's just life --UNCLEARWORD --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> exactly you 're just so shallow you
if Microsoft would phone you up --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> exactly like if you ever
nnecessary for male go-go dancers to --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> excellent I liked that --UNCLEARWORD
the Australians are annoying --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> except for --UNCLEARWORD good day
their cock out ? --UNCLEARWORD ? <vocal desc="laugh"/> excuse me ? Do n't you
keeps putting in for his accident --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> excuse me I tried changi
about not having food after --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> f- fill your candle mate
as the mark I just put that --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> fair enough mm I do n't
the fan is here of course --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> fan is right beside you yeah
it was oh yeah Fantasia --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> Fantasia was my introduction to classical
time do you spend on --UNCLEARWORD ? <vocal desc="laugh"/> fantastic the
his favourite expressions He also said --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> fantastic hm
INCLEARWORD the dimensions were --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> fantastic what 's love got
sofa bed fight it out --UNCLEARWORD <vocal desc="laugh"/> feel more comfortable hey

Figure 1. *Sample of concordance lines from the Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al., 2017) showing the laugh tag preceded by an unclear word*

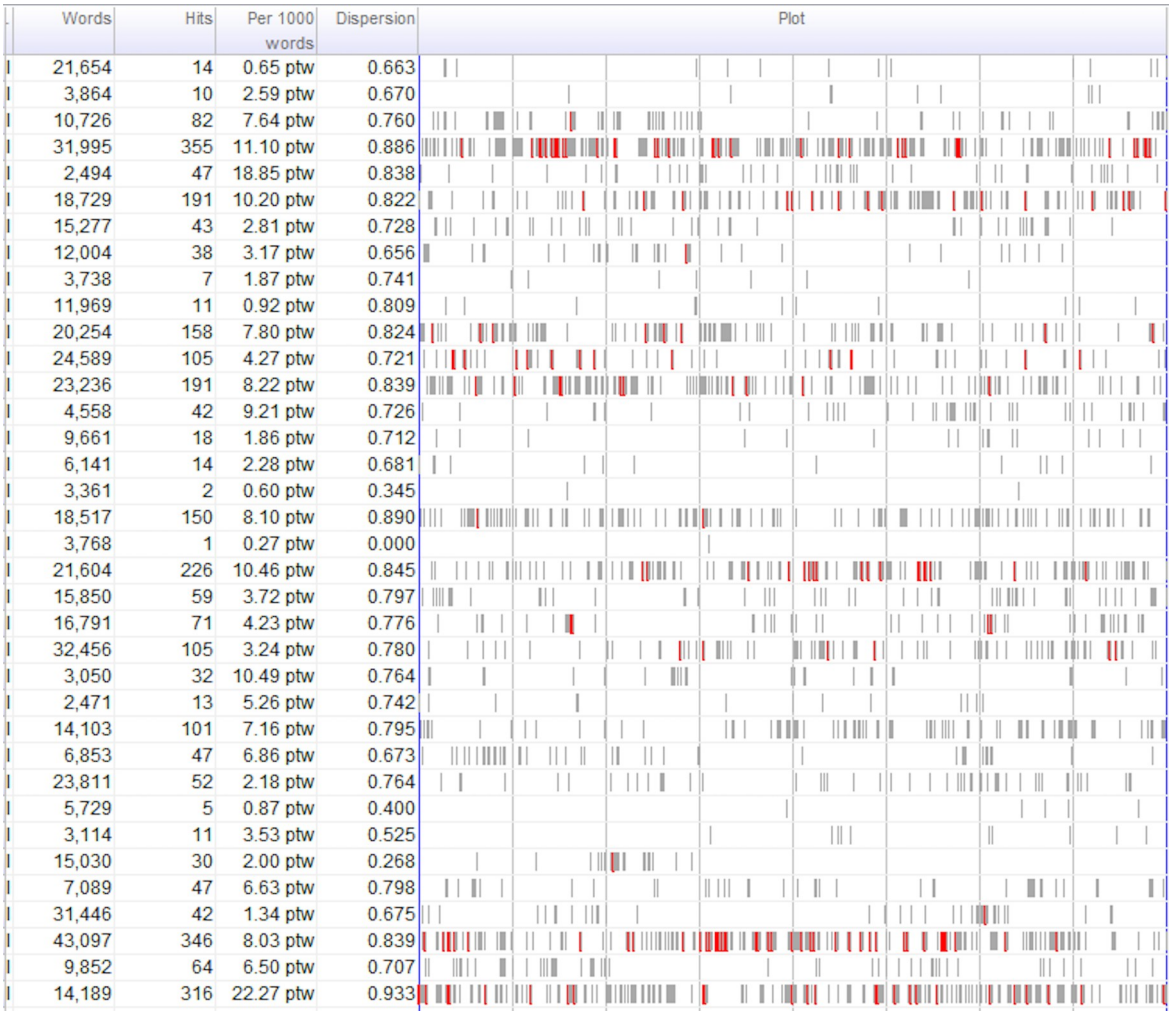
Furthermore, the extra-linguistic element *laugh* quite often appears with or overlaps into lexical conversation elements that are not clear enough to be transcribed. One can interpret this as a marker indicating the relative strength or pervasiveness of laughter when the use of lexical items in an utterance gives way to an outburst of laughter. Amongst the 107,587 concordance lines, the *laugh* tag is preceded by an 'unclear' word 3,857 times and followed by one 3,615 times; an 'unclear word' also appears in L2 and R2 position of laughter as tagged, occurring there nearly 1,200 times. This means *<vocal desc='laugh'/>* comes closely after or is almost directly followed by a word that was unclear to the transcriber in around 5% of all cases. In fact, sometimes the words before and after are simply not audible as Figure 1 shows.

Looking at the data overall, it can be seen that, in line with what Partington (2011) noted, evidence of *laughter* occurs often with change, in particular the change of speaker. Most commonly, the second speaker seems to agree with the first speaker: thus *laughs* tends to be followed by the discourse particle *yeah* in over 8% of all concordance lines (8,782); it is used as an affirmative in R2 position (e.g., *yes, yeah*) in over 2% of all cases (2,792). Conversely, in over 7% of all cases, *laughter* follows the discourse particle *yeah* (7,103), whereas laughter following the hesitation-marker *well* is markedly less frequent (655 occurrences—under 1%).

Secondly, *laughter* appears to be apologetic to a degree. A speaker's new turn starting with laughter occurs in 866 concordance lines (ca. 8 times per 1,000 words). Among these the second speaker starts a new turn with laughter followed by a formula like *I don't know* in about one out of 100 cases. Less frequent (under 1%) is laughter plus a negative or negation. It must be noted that such occurrences are, on the greater scheme of things, relatively infrequent however. By contrast, *laughter* is followed by use of the first person singular with the use of personal verbs most regularly: *I** appears almost 95 times in every 1,000 concordance lines (10,182 occurrences in total) and is therefore a more salient marker.

Moreover, while this vocalization can be found to appear spontaneously throughout any given conversation, it is rather less frequent at the start: looking at plotting data, burst of laughter early in conversations appear in fewer than 200 out of 1,239 concordance lines. This is similar, to a degree, also at the end of any recorded discourse, where there is laughter towards the very end in 349 out of 1,239 concordance lines.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the Spoken BNC2014 details that the occurrence pattern of laughter appears to be fairly random. Overall, it has been observed that the length of a recording is clearly not relevant. This highlights the need to find details in the concordance lines and in the metadata that can be used to explain the clear absence of laughter (and, conversely, the high frequency of laughter) occurring in the different recordings. Given the large number of files, only partial evidence can be considered here.



Words	Hits	Per 1000 words	Dispersion	Plot
21,654	14	0.65 ptw	0.663	
3,864	10	2.59 ptw	0.670	
10,726	82	7.64 ptw	0.760	
31,995	355	11.10 ptw	0.886	
2,494	47	18.85 ptw	0.838	
18,729	191	10.20 ptw	0.822	
15,277	43	2.81 ptw	0.728	
12,004	38	3.17 ptw	0.656	
3,738	7	1.87 ptw	0.741	
11,969	11	0.92 ptw	0.809	
20,254	158	7.80 ptw	0.824	
24,589	105	4.27 ptw	0.721	
23,236	191	8.22 ptw	0.839	
4,558	42	9.21 ptw	0.726	
9,661	18	1.86 ptw	0.712	
6,141	14	2.28 ptw	0.681	
3,361	2	0.60 ptw	0.345	
18,517	150	8.10 ptw	0.890	
3,768	1	0.27 ptw	0.000	
21,604	226	10.46 ptw	0.845	
15,850	59	3.72 ptw	0.797	
16,791	71	4.23 ptw	0.776	
32,456	105	3.24 ptw	0.780	
3,050	32	10.49 ptw	0.764	
2,471	13	5.26 ptw	0.742	
14,103	101	7.16 ptw	0.795	
6,853	47	6.86 ptw	0.673	
23,811	52	2.18 ptw	0.764	
5,729	5	0.87 ptw	0.400	
3,114	11	3.53 ptw	0.525	
15,030	30	2.00 ptw	0.268	
7,089	47	6.63 ptw	0.798	
31,446	42	1.34 ptw	0.675	
43,097	346	8.03 ptw	0.839	
9,852	64	6.50 ptw	0.707	
14,189	316	22.27 ptw	0.933	

Figure 2. *Random selection of the 'laugh' dispersion graph, showing the acute differences of the use of laughter between unrelated conversations*

In order to look at differences between high and low *laugh* occurring conversations, it would make sense to compare the highest vs. lowest occurring per 1,000 words. As the lowest would only take into account files with a single tagged incident, the lowest vs. highest dispersion rate was chosen instead. Amongst the lowest 22, between 0.0[1] and 3.4 laughs per 1,000 words have been recorded, amongst the highest 22, it is between 5.2 and 28.9.[2]

When it comes to the dispersion of laughter, there is no obvious difference based on gender. In both groups, there are 1.3 female speakers for every male speaker. The most

1 i.e., one single laugh.

2 The 22 samples each have, in fact, both conversations by only 21 groups of speakers. I have no explanation why the Spoken BNC2014 splits some conversations into two separate units.

common social class[3] is E—though amongst the low dispersion group, pensioners form the majority, while in the high dispersion group, people in this class are mostly students.

Number of Speakers	2	3	4	8 or 9
Number of exchanges with Low Dispersion	13	7	2	0
Number of exchanges with High Dispersion	6	6	8	2

Table 1. *Group sizes profile found in the lowest and highest laugh dispersion groups*

There might be a slight tendency towards a higher degree of laughter being linked to class: the low dispersion group has speakers in the social class A in 10 out of 22 conversations; for the high dispersion group the number is four speakers. The latter also has more speakers in class C1 (four instead of three) and, crucially, has speakers from classes C2 and D (nine) which are absent in the low dispersion group. As Table 1 shows, one difference between these two sets—though it does not apply in all cases—is that a higher recorded frequency of laughs seems to correlate with larger groups of speakers. One possible explanation for this could be that, as it is rather impractical for every person to take a full verbal turn throughout the conversation, laughter acts as a place-holder and provides a better way to backchannel than *um* or *yeah* would.

The second main factor to see presence or absence of laughter is, one might assume, the subject matter appearing in the conversations. It is notable that half of the conversations recorded are between a man and a woman (possibly wife and husband). And the subject matter tends to involve making arrangements or complaints. Amongst the high dispersion dialogues, only two out of 22 involve a female and male speaker in the conversations recorded (the other four being either all-female or all-male dialogues):

- In the low dispersion group, the most frequent subject of the conversations are *making arrangements* and *complaints*.
- In the high dispersion group, almost all conversations fall into the conversation type *discussing*, *explaining*, *anecdote telling*—supplemented by *telling jokes* and *talk about holidays*.

An investigation of a random sample of concordance lines provides an insight into the pragmatic function of *laughter* occurrence. An initial hypothesis was based on Devereux and Ginsburg (2001) who also started 'expect[ing] that laughing would be greatest in the presence of a preexisting relationship' (p. 230). Yet the evidence in the Spoken BNC2014 aligns with their own findings. The amount of laughter recorded in the Spoken BNC2014 can be both very low and extremely high even though, on both occasions, the relationship in the metadata is described as 'close friends'. The differences in the amount of

3 Please see the Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al., 2017, pp. 27-31) corpus manual for details. In short, Social Grade A are the professional classes; Social Grade E those who are unemployed, pensioners, etc. C2 and D refer to skilled and unskilled manual workers respectively while Social Grade C1 are non-manual workers —like junior managers, shopkeepers, etc.

laughter recorded appears to be related to the activities the speakers undertake. If talk is at the level of being merely responsive (people watching TV together), there are few occasions where laughter occurs. However, where the participants actively engage in a communal activity (playing a game, cooking or baking together), laughter is recorded with a very high frequency.

Overall, this case study provides a neat insight into how a corpus can be employed for extra-lexical elements in a discourse. Laughter is typically present in casual conversations. The Spoken BNC2014 data indicates that this presence is nuanced: laughter is more typically absent when information is conveyed; on the other hand, laughter is employed to respond to a previous speaker, in particular, to agree with them. Yet more notable is the fact that laughter tends to be absent when people are gathered together but do not interact: vocal presence of laughter can be seen as highlighting a strong degree of co-operation and engagement amongst the speakers of the group. This fits well with Partington's (2006) observation that laughter tends to 'occur within phases of interaction, whilst the long stretches where laughter is absent tend to indicate phases of transaction' (p. 10).

Looking at the Spoken BNC2014 confirmed what Partington (2011) noted in his White House briefings corpus—laughter is linked to a shift of speaker. Looking at Partington's (2014) investigations of absences, laughter becomes a relevant element when we look at '"unknown absence"...the serendipitous discovery during the course of research that some feature or behaviour is absent from something or somewhere' (p. 122). While laughter is prevalent in casual speech, it is never evenly distributed and this research highlights the concrete absence of laughter where groups of people passively consume entertainment together.

3. The absence and presence of gestures in Dickens's fiction

3.1. Introduction: gestures

This particular case study brings together two different approaches to the same research topic, namely, how people, when speaking, use gestures as instruments to indicate, emphasize and underscore the message they intend to convey. These gestures necessarily accompany the spoken word. There has been a lot of laboratory-based research, tracking the use of gestures (e.g., Azar et al., 2019) as well as the seminal investigations by Debreslioska and Gullberg (2020a, 2020b, 2022). A lot of this links back to earlier work by Gullberg (2006), who looked at how L2 learners employ gestures. For this particular study, their work is highly relevant as it gives insights into how and what gestures naturally occur in discourses.

The focus of this case study is to look in how far Dickens, in his novels, reflects the natural use of gestures. In Victorian fiction in particular, it has long been recognized that gestures play an important part of the description of conversations (see for example, Smitten, 1979). Looking at a corpus-based study of Dickens's work, Michaela Mahlberg

and colleagues (2014, 2016, 2020) as well as Stockwell and Mahlberg (2015) have shown how important the use of various gestures appears to be within the Dickens corpus.

3.2. Background: gestures

Gullberg (2006) makes very clear how important a holistic approach to discourse elements is in order to perform a conversation: 'For discourse to be comprehensible and cohesive, you have to know who does what to whom when and where. Information about entities (people and objects), time, space, and actions have to be carefully tracked and managed from one utterance to the next' (p. 156). While the focus of her research is on how L2 learners acquire the use of gestures that combine with the words spoken, she starts off in highlighting the basis in L1:

> Gestures, defined as the (mainly manual) movements speakers perform unwittingly while they speak (cf. Kendon, 1986, 2004; McNeill, 1992), are closely and systematically related to language and speech. Gestures are *semantically coexpressive with speech*, such that they often convey meaning also present in speech either iconically, or by way of spatial contiguity, or indexicality [emphasis added]. (Gullberg, 2006, p. 158)

Gullberg highlights how speech can carry an element of ambiguity, in particular in L2 learner speech. By contrast, she asserts, gestures appear to be more clear-cut. In fact, she refers to Levy and Fowler (2000) saying that '[s]patial anchoring and the repeated indication of a locus allow visual and explicit coreference to be established even in the absence of clear-cut distinctions in speech' (p. 162). In the study undertaken, it is shown that anaphoric gestures are used even where the conversation partner is not able to see the speaker.[4] One can go as far as to say that speakers and listeners have sub-conscious co-priming where gestures are concerned. Thus, certain words, expressions and semantic pointers will be understood more easily when a listener takes in the non-verbal signals a speaker produces:

> Visual attention to gestures is not guided by movement, nor by the location of gestures in gesture space. However, different gestures are fixated for different reasons: gestures that speakers themselves have fixated (Speaker-fixated gestures) are looked at for social, top-down related reasons, and gestures that stop moving (Holds) are fixated for reasons related to the inner workings of the visual system. (Gullberg & Holmquist, 2006, p. 76)

Furthermore, Debreslioska and Gullberg (2020a, 2020b, 2022) demonstrate that there is a clear distinction in the gestures used between 'giveness' and 'newness', between how definite or vague the content and, furthermore, how closely aligned to clause-structure gestures are. Azar et al. (2019) found that, for a non-European language (Turkish), the differences are not necessarily qualitative but rather quantitative, compared to the results described above. It must be noted that these investigations focus on gestures, meaning that arm, hand and finger-movements are studied, yet facial expressions are ignored.

Smitten (1979) looks at *Tristram Shandy* and tracks how gestures are described in this early English novel to give the readership an insight into the emotions of the characters.

4 A phenomenon that ought to be familiar to anyone who watches people during audio-only phone calls.

He traces back the insights that gestures are an intricate part of human expression, quoting Lord Kames who wrote in 1762 that the 'natural signs of emotion, voluntary and involuntary, being nearly the same in all men, form a universal language, which no distance of place, no difference of tribe, no diversity of tongue, can darken or render doubtful' (as cited in Smitten, 1979, p. 85).[5] Yet, when it comes to fictional works, Smitten (1979) makes clear that descriptions might be difficult: '[n]ovelists, working in a medium consisting of arbitrary signs, can only imitate natural signs; they present natural signs directly.…The semiotics of gesture and expression is a complex an unresolved subject' (p. 86). This notwithstanding, he shows how Sterne uses the semiotics of gesture to a great and lasting effect. In fact, Smitten indicates that the very presence of gestures in novels of the era made them so successful with their readership: 'This analysis of gesture and expression … suggested not only the unique character of this particular novel but also the important function gesture and expression can have in any eighteenth-century novel. Gesture and expression are lively points of contact between reader and text' (Smitten, 1979, p. 95).

More recently, and with a concrete focus on the work of Charles Dickens, Mahlberg and colleagues have moved from a manual selection to empirical, corpus-based analysis of literary texts. Mahlberg (2012) highlights the evidence corpus-based research of Dickens makes observable: 'Clusters that provide contextual information can support another activity when they illustrate a gesture that is typically associated with a particular situation' (p. 22). Her examples show (in line with Smitten's earlier observations) that descriptions of gestures often appear in place of a direct description. For example, 'rubbing his hands' in place of 'he is nervous'. Their research since 2013 showed the use of body language words and clusters (including the respective frequencies) in the work of Dickens, which could then be compared to other 19th century works. As an example Mahlberg et al. (2013) gives the clusters 'and his nose came down', 'his eyes fixed on the' as well as 'his hand to his forehead' are given: these show that the investigations go beyond just gestures and demonstrate how Dickens repeatedly makes use of non-verbal expressions which are not confined to any single one of his novels. One area ignored for this case study is the combination of body language and eye-movements which both Gullberg and Holmquist (2006) in the lab, as well as Mahlberg et al. (2020), based on Dickens's novels, have focused upon.

3.3. Methodology: gestures

Firstly, it must be stated that the focus here will not be on all the elements of body language as described by Smitten or Mahlberg and colleagues. For reasons of space, this study only looks at gestures, in particular, hand gestures. For this particular case study, elements from Debreslioska and Gullberg as well as Mahlberg et al.'s work are employed. Mahlberg's Dickens corpus (DCorp)—which consists of 23 files, and a total number of 4,533,640 tokens—will be used in order to find word clusters and co-text for the target

5 Smitten, in his footnote (5) describes how gesture's in Sterne's works have been reviewed as early as in the 1940s and 1960s.

words *movement(s)*, *gesture(s)*, *point(s)*, *hand(s)* and *finger(s)*. The choice of these target words is based on the reference to gestures as described by Azar et al. (2019) and Debreslioska and Gullberg (2020a, 2020b, 2022). The resulting concordance lines will be investigated to see whether there is a salient link between the gestures described and the words or expressions used. As a final step, this study will investigate if the gestures present in the DCorp match the real-world use of gestures as described in the empirical experiments.

3.4. Findings and Discussion: gestures

The DCorp corpus shows a clear preference for references to *hand* or *hands* which are highly frequent and appear in all 23 novels. Likewise, one particular movement—the deictic *point(s)*—is fairly prominent while the more general terms are infrequent and not found in all books as Table 2 shows.

DCorp	Movement/s		Gesture/s		Finger/s		Point*	Points	Hand	Hands
Number of occurrences	105	27	114	47	381	403	1798	225	5941	3029
Number of files	19	12	18	17	23	22	23	22	23	23
Number of human gestures (hg)	17	0					589	3	5599	2988
Number of files for hg	8	0					23	3	23	23

***Table 2**: Occurrence patterns of target words in Dcorp*

There is one caveat, however. The target words *movement(s)* do not necessarily refer to gestures or, indeed, humans. Similarly, *point** might not refer to a relevant action but could be a part of a noun phrase (NP); while *hand(s)* can refer to an action or the hands of a clock. For that reason, Table 2 has final rows labelled 'hg', meaning 'human gesture'. In doing so, *movement* is only linked in 17 cases to body parts, whereas *movements*, like *points*, are not relevant for this investigation. Furthermore, it was observed that *hand(s)* rarely gets used for idioms or clock hands: Dickens usually employs these words for gestures, and this is also true for *point* in the word forms *pointed* or *pointing*.

While *gestures* is the umbrella term (as Smitten, 1979, makes clear), it is not a word that is, in itself, frequently used by Dickens himself. Looking at the most frequently recurring uses of *gestures*, it becomes clear that Dickens uses the term in a very general way: *he made a gesture as if to leave the room*, *holding up his hand with a cautious gesture*, and with the use of *made an...impatient gesture* (six occurrences) being the most prominent. While *gesture* co-occurs 16 times with *hand* these, too, appear for a variety of uses.

The use of *fingers* is more interesting. According to Jorgensen (2019, p. 44) the 10 most frequent references to appear in fairy tales are *hair*, *hands*, *tears*, *mind*, *blood*, *birth*, *finger*, *nose*, *lap* and *lips*. Mahlberg et al. however, say little about the occurrences of finger(s) in Dickens. Yet, amongst the most frequent uses, *fingers* tend to belong to male characters—and here it is employed to say *he put / he laid / laying / his fingers on his lips* (12 times) or *his finger on his lip* (eight times) while it is only five times *her finger on her lip*. Furthermore, there is also *the irresolute fingers went to the trembling lip* whereby the two strong modifiers underscore emotion linked to the gesture. In addition to that, male characters have *snapped* or are *snapping* their fingers (14 times each). Furthermore, *fingers pointed* or are *pointing* (16 times each in 10 texts) whereby the act of pointing tends to precede the word *finger*.

While not the focus of work by Mahlberg and colleagues, Table 2 indicates that *pointing* is the most prominent physical action in the novels. Thus, there are 20 occurrences of *pointing at* (a person) as well as 39 occurrences of *pointing out* (NP) and 111 occurrences of *pointing to* (NP) whereby these tend to be objects but also include persons. Similarly, *pointed at* occurs 13 times (only six of which is *pointed at* (a person) and 80 lines of *pointed to* (NP).[6] Indeed, the pointing gesture is often described in gesture research. Therefore, Debreslioska and Gullberg (2022) show it as a focal point for a couple of publications where they look at the information status of gesture production, in particular the presence vs. absence of gestures, in adult speakers. Referring to earlier studies, Gullberg (2006) describes pointing as having a 'locus [that] is arbitrary and abstract and bears no relationship to actual space. However, once established, it is often maintained throughout discourse such that speakers refer back to the locus when they reintroduce the referent associated with it' (p. 159). Yet, Dickens does use *pointing* for a defined locus. Thus, *pointing upward* appears three times in close succession in *David Copperfield* and points to *an upper window*. Also, characters use pens and sticks to point and clearly intend this to be deictic as in the following examples:

(1) the phantom interposed, and pointed with its finger to the boy (*The Haunted Man*)

(2) he pointed with his skinny fore-finger up the stairs (*Oliver Twist*)

Table 3 looks at comparative research by Mahlberg and colleagues (2013). The clear focus is on the most frequent term, namely *hand* and *hands*. This provides a first insight into how clusters with *hand* are woven intricately into Dickens's narratives, whereas other 19th century writers (in her 19C corpus—see Mahlberg, 2012) appear to make far less use of the terms *hand* and *hands*. Furthermore, Mahlberg et al. (2016) show the prominence of the cluster *with both hands* which tends to co-occur with *by the collar*; while Mahlberg, Conklin and Bisson (2014) also discuss the cluster *his hand to his forehead* as illustrating a pattern with a highlighting function. According to Mahlberg (2012), clusters like *his hands in his pockets*, following John Sinclair's definition, can be seen as idiomatic. Given

6 It must be noted that Mahlberg and colleagues do not discuss *point(s)* as it occurs in Dickens. Instead, their uses are functional ('points out', 'point of view', 'starting point', etc.).

that the research undertaken here uses the same corpus, the DCorp, it can be seen as an extension of their research, using a different focus.

Cluster	Number in DCorp	Number in 19C
his hands in his pockets	90	13
with his hands in his	60	12
hands in his pockets and	40	5
with his hand to his	31	2
laying his hand upon his	22	1
the palms of his hands	17	0
her hand upon his shoulder	15	0

***Table 3**: Occurrence frequency in Dickens (DCorp) compared to other 19th century fiction (19C) based on Mahlberg's (2012) Table 6.1, Body Part clusters (p. 106)*

Looking at *hands*, the most frequent usage is body language rather than gesture. (*With*) *his hands in his pockets* occurs 132 times, whereas a gesture of greeting, *shook hands* (*with*) appears 130 times; *shaking hands* and *shake hands* appear 84 and 78 times respectively.[7] The most obvious gesture appearing in Dickens's novels appears to be *rubbing / rubbed his / her hands*, which is found 148 times.

For this particular research, however, the prepositions following *hands* are the most relevant, as Table 4 demonstrates:

Preposition	Number	Most frequent cluster	Number	2nd most frequent cluster	Number
UPON	105	his hands upon his knees	8	lay hands upon	5
ON	59	his hands on his knees	13		
TOGETHER	48	his hands together	23	her hands together	11
BEFORE	39	her hands before her face	12	his hands before his face	5
BEHIND	37	his hands behind him	30	with her hands behind her	3
INTO	36	his hands into his pockets	17	thrust his hands into his pockets	13
FOLDED	24	with her hands folded on one knee	4	her hands folded before her	3
CLASPED	18	his/her hands clasped behind	7		
OVER	13	her hands over	4	his hands over	3
FROM	12	her hands from	4		

***Table 4**: The two most frequent clusters for 'hands' movements arranged by preposition usage*

7 There is also *shaken hands* which accounts for a further 25 occurrences.

It is interesting to note that, *his hands upon his knees* typically co-occurs with another gesture and Dickens uses this particular phrase to demonstrate the character's command of the situation:

(3) He stops in his rubbing and looks at her, with his hands on his knees. Imperturbable and unchangeable as he is, there is still an indefinable freedom in his manner. (*Bleak House*)

His hands upon his knees is slightly different: it seems to refer to a previous action taken and now the character sits still and quiet, expecting things to come as in this example:

(4) Mr Squeers … placed his hands upon his knees, and looked at the pupils with as much benignity. (*Nicholas Nickleby*)

This also links the occurrences *hands folded*, which co-occur with *stately* or *upright* while the *with her hands folded upon her knee* typically follow from *her dress tucked up*. In all cases, Dickens tries to evoke an atmosphere of the character being fully focused on the conversation they are having.

As Tables 3 and 4 show, there is both the gesture *his hands into his pockets* and the follow on, *his hands in his pockets* about which Mahlberg (2007) says the following: "'walk up and down" (example 13), is an activity that is also found in Dickens together with "his hands in pockets" in situations where a character seems to be thinking about something' (p. 23). This stands in stark contrast to *thrust his hands into his pockets*, which appears in 5 of Dickens's novels. This gesture typically represents a character who feels superior yet frustrated, as this line excellently demonstrates:

(5) Having given him this piece of moral advice for his trouble…the Perpetual Grand Master of the Glorious Apollos thrust his hands into his pockets and sauntered away. (*Old Curiosity Shop*)

Only a third of these examples also refers to the characters pondering and walking (as in walking away or walking up and down).

Pondering and walking could also be assumed to be expressed with *his hands* (*clasped*) *behind his back*. Although, while it often co-occurs with walking or running, Dickens also makes reference to *clasped hands* when the character in question feels uneasy, is haunted by painful memories or feels, indeed, abject terror:

(6) She came bounding down…looked round with her hands clasped and her face full of terror. (*Hard Times*)

The movement of (*passing*) *hands over* has two main characteristics: the hands pass over a head: either the mouth or the eyes or, indeed, the head itself. The hands doing this action are described with negatively connoted terms like *heavy*, *horny*, *rough*, *skeleton*, *skinny*, *white*, *wrinkled hands* or they are infirm: *shaking hands* occurs four times. Once the hands are even described as *desperate*. The notion of ill-health is also reflected in the following example:

(7) he feared he must put himself under the doctor's hands. (*Martin Chuzzlewit*)

The most frequent reference to a gesture involves the item *hand*. The most frequent trigram is *in his hand* (364 occurrences). This term most frequently appears in forms of *with his hand* (219 occurrences) so, *with his right hand* occurs 79 and *with his left hand* seven times. Much less frequent are *laying his hand* (77 occurrences) and *with his other hand* (66 occurrences).

It is interesting to note that *hand*, even more than *hands* appears for performative actions. Thus there are greetings (*waving*—44: *waved*—26 occurrences) and the related *kissed his / her hand* (26 occurrences) *kissing his / her hand* (16 occurrences) as well as *pressed / pressing x hand* (29 and 21 occurrences respectively); *grasped / grasping x hand* (9 and 17 occurrences respectively). Besides that, there are numerous references to shaking hands. Thus, for example, *the extended hand* (18 occurrences), or even *stretching forth his / the hand* (12 occurrences), which are both more frequent, surprisingly, than *shaking his / her / my hand*: clearly the act of shaking hands has to be expressed, typically, in a form that refers to both parties. Purely deictic functions are all mentions of *hand* with the preposition *towards*.

Preposition	Number	Most frequent cluster	Number	2nd most frequent cluster	Number
UPON	365	hand upon his/her/my shoulder	58	hand upon my/her/his arm	26
				hand upon his/my/her heart	18
TO	318	his hand to her/his forehead	20	hand to his/her lips	18
ON	187	laying his hand on	28	hand on my shoulder	9
OVER	48	his hand over his forehead	5	his hand over his face/eyes/brow	2
ACROSS	41	his hand across his	30	his hand across his eyes	6
				his hand across his forehead	8
TOWARDS	39	motion of his hand towards	4	she moved her hand towards his lips	2
		motion of her hand towards	2		
INTO	36	his hand into his breast (pocket)	12		
BEFORE	33	his hand before his face	5	her hand before her eye/brow/face	1

***Table 5**: The two most frequent clusters for 'hand' movement arranged by preposition usage*

By contrast, emotions are an individual expression, thus the *trembling hand* (occurs 30 times)[8] or the *clenched hand* (occurs 19 times). Looking at the terms that represent unconscious gestures *passing his hand...forehead* (18 occurrences) stands out. Mahlberg, Smith

8 *Most trembling hands* seem to indicate a highly emotional state. A further six lines clearly appear to be descriptive of old, infirm characters.

and Preston (2013) see it as a particular habit of Twemlow in the novel *Our Mutual Friend*. It must be said, however, that *hand* with *forehead* as part of a movement—it occurs 59 times in 17 works by Dickens—and appears therefore with other characters as well, expressing thoughtfulness, confusion, or exhaustion.

Most of the movements and gestures with *hand* shown in Table 5 are unlikely to be found in a laboratory set-up with volunteer participants who do not know each other, and tend to be placed at a physical distance from each other.[9] By contrast, the examples found in Dickens's novels often reflect a level of bodily contact that reflects solidarity or intimacy between characters. Thus, Mahlberg (2006) describes the most frequently found cluster as 'If you put your hand on someone's shoulder this can be an encouraging gesture' (p. 22). Yet nothing is said about *heart* (apart from saying it is one of the most frequently mentioned body parts in Dickens). In the novels, it often appears as a signifier of humbleness of the speaker, whose gesture accompanies their words:

(8) 'I shone with a reflected light, my lord,' replied the humble secretary, laying his hand upon his heart. 'I did my best.' (*Barnaby Rudge*)

Yet the research by Marianne Gullberg and her colleagues focusses on gestures recorded in laboratory conditions either during conversations or when retelling a story. They look at uses of *hand* that seem to have been ignored by Mahlberg and Mahlberg et al. For example, the laboratory research speaks of uses of hand gestures shown in Table 6.

	GESTURE/USE			Number in DCorp	Example	Number
1		HAND	arm	50	laying his hand upon his arm	40
			palm	41	palm of his right/left hand	37
2	right	HAND		268	right hand	249
	left			171	left hand	127
3	up	HAND		310	lifting/holding up his hands	72
	down			152	X[10]	
	beat			23	beat his/her/the hand	23
	swing			0		
	grasping			32	grasping his/her/the hand	31
4		HAND	shape	3	XX	

***Table 6**: Hand gestures typically observed in naturally occurring conversations and their frequency of occurrence in Dcorp*

9 Marianne Gullberg, in a plenary talk given at the University of Jyväskylä, showed a number of videos taken of the set-up of her team's gesture research which showed that direct physical contact between speakers was not part of the set up.

10 X) Both *down* and *back* are found to refer to a hand gesture in combination with a separate movement; XX) *shape* is a collocate of hand but doe not refer to a physical movement.

Table 6 shows that Dickens, either consciously or subconsciously, mirrors the natural use of hands as observed. Beyond the target words chosen here, there are other movements he describes (as shown in Table 4). However, while Mahlberg et al. have focused on body-language, apart from the odd quote from the concordance lines, only *the palms of his hands* (cf. Table 3) appear to have been noted. As can be seen, there is a dominance for right-hand movements compared to left-hand movements recorded. This is broadly in line with the dominance of right-handedness. Where the observations differ from Dickens's works is the kind of *beat* movement described. Azar et al. (2019) quote McNeill (1992), saying that '*Beat gestures* are short and quick hand movements such as *up and down*, or *back and forth*' [emphasis added]. In a number of the observations, the researchers talk of participants 'picking up' an object. Indeed, *picking up* occurs in the works of Dickens 35 times as well. Yet the *lifting/holding up* of hands was not observed.

Grasping is of interest as Debreslioska and Gullberg (2020a) describe a participant retelling a story where the act of 'the fairy grasping the hand' is exactly mapped by their own hand movements. Something similar is observed by Arbona et al. (2023) who describe how 'hands play the part of the character as a whole: the speaker might move her hand from left to right with a swinging movement to depict a character swinging on a rope' (p. 428). This is, moreover, also true for *shape* in combination with *hands*. Debreslioska and Gullberg (2020a) speak of 'entity' gestures which accompany newly introduced referents that are expressed by indefinite nominals (they give the example of 'indicating the shape of 'a broom').

The usage patterns of these three words highlight why some of the movements observed under laboratory conditions are less relevant to the hand movements Dickens's characters make: the former use these in retelling of stories—while a *grasping of hands* would show a present action in the novel.

There is, however, one co-occurrence pattern within the use of gestures during conversation which appears to have been ignored both by Mahlberg and colleagues as well as Gullberg and colleagues. This concerns the occurrences of *laughter* in the Dickens corpus, in other words, linking insights from the first and second case study. There are 1,860 occurrences of the word forms of *laugh** (410 per million words). Some of these do, indeed, co-occur with *point*, *finger* and *hand*.

There are three cases where *laugh** is followed by *pointed*:

(9) She slowly, very slowly, broke into a *laugh*, and *pointed* at Emily with her hand... (*David Copperfield*)

(10) 'And besides,' added Bella, *laughing* as she *pointed* a rallying finger at his face… (*Our Mutual Friend*)

(11) With a weird little *laugh*, Miss Jenny *pointed* to her crutch-stick as her… (*Our Mutual Friend*)

And, apart from (10), two further uses for the combination of *laugh** and *finger**:

(12) 'Someone, Trotwood,' said Agnes, *laughing*, and holding up her *finger*… (*Our Mutual Friend*)

(13) He snapped his *fingers* and *laughed*. 'Come,' said he, 'since no better may be …'
(*Uncommercial Traveller*)

The most frequent co-occurrence is, however, *laugh** with *hand(s)*, which can be found in 32 concordance lines. Of these, the majority represent *laughing* and *shaking* or *clapping hands* as well as *laughing* and *rubbing hands* (four occurrences each for all tenses). Crucially, *laugh** is part of the gesture represented as the use of conjunctions highlights. There are 10 cases of *hand(s)* and *laugh** and nine cases of *laugh** + verb phrase (VP) where *hand(s)* co-occurs.

What is notable is that laughter in combination with gestures has been widely ignored in the target literature. There is only one mention in Mahlberg et al. (2013) where the authors highlight that '[w]ithin the suspension the meaning of the verb *exclaimed* is enforced through details on the tone or the body language of a character. This information can show heightened emotion (e.g., *in a tone of great enjoyment*, line 1, ***laughing and clapping*** *her* ***hands***…' (p. 51; emphasis added). Crucially, however, there is a clear absence of any mention of laughter in combination with gestures at all in Gullberg and colleague's research.

This particular case study is informed by two very different approaches: Mahlberg and colleagues work with the same corpus material, yet their focus is on body language as a whole, rather than just gestures. Gullberg and colleagues, by contrast, look at real people, rather than fictional characters, albeit in the artificial environment of a laboratory experiment with the sole focus on gestures. Using valuable insights from both, the present investigation used the DCorp to expand the findings of the Dickens research Mahlberg was involved in. As such, gestures described from natural observations were looked for in the DCorp, thus expanding the range of body part clusters investigated in earlier research. Furthermore, this study provides strong indications of the link between gestures and laughter.

A lot of the experimental work looked at gestures used in re-telling, thus beat-like movements and abstract, non-localised pointing seemed prominent, though these do not feature much in Dickens. The work of Smitten (1979) and Mahlberg and colleagues provided useful pointers as to why detailed gesture and body language descriptions can be found in literary texts: often they provide a short-cut to replace blunt and bland description of emotional states, periods of contemplation, etc. While both *finger(s)* and *point** give an indication who this is locally managed by Charles Dickens, the focus, as far as gestures are concerned, is clearly on the words *hand* and *hands*. Mahlberg (2006) seems to have been the first to show that, in Dickens, *walk* and *hands in his pockets* often appear together, evoking the image of a character pondering over an issue that has happened (just) before. Here it has been shown that gestures and other forms of non-lexical expression do, indeed, appear prominently in Dickens, not least *laughing*.

4. Conclusions

This chapter has provided two case studies that give first insights into 'absence and presence' in corpus linguistics, following Partington (2014).

The first study looked at Partington (2006, 2008, 2011) as well as other research into occurrences of laughter in discourse as a basis for investigating *laughter*. The second case study looked at known absences—namely the fact that the behaviour of fictional characters can appear incomplete reflections of the natural behaviour of real people.

Overall, the research findings show that a well-constructed corpus can deliver a wealth of information of when and how laughter is employed by speakers even if the phonological qualities of these vocalisations are not available. This highlights the fact that, even with the absence of audio, a well-designed corpus can still provide a wealth of extra-lexical information which can form the basis of research. Partington (2011) showed how laughter tends to be a signal for turn-taking, in particular when the next speaker responds to a previous speaker, and (often) to agree with them, which the Spoken BNC2014 data confirms. Yet this new casual spoken corpus also highlights when *laughter* is absent and when it is present: *laughter* tends to be absent when (new) information is conveyed. Crucially, *laughter* tends to be absent when people are gathered together but do not interact: vocal presence of laughter can be seen as highlighting a strong degree of cooperation and engagement amongst the speakers of the group.

Likewise, the concrete absence of natural conversations in works of fiction—here the novels of Charles Dickens—still allow for research into the use of gestures. Dickens clearly used descriptions of bodies and gestural movements to create well-rounded characters. In this investigation, the focus was on *pointing*, *finger(s)* and *hand(s)*. Earlier research by Smitten as well as Mahlberg and colleagues has already shown the importance of body language in Dickens's developments of his fictional characters. Focusing on gestures only confirms that the corpus has repeat-occurrences of clusters that indicate gestures that point towards solidarity (*puts his hands on his shoulder*), show the character thinking or contemplating (*his hands upon his knees*), or indicate heightened emotion, for example, with *hands clasped*.

Real life observations by Gullberg and colleagues have informed the second case study to look for gestures absent in previous corpus-based research, namely details of the characters' hands (like their palms, left-or-right hand use, arm-and-hand gestures, etc.) which adds valuable information.

Yet the presence of co-occurrence described by Dickens—in particular how laughter and certain gestures combine, as shown here, shows that corpus-driven investigations can still be useful for lab-based research: while Mahlberg et al. (2013) acknowledge that this can be found in Dickens, the research into gestures by Gullberg and colleagues makes no mention of laughter accompanying any of the gestures recorded.

While these two case studies provide only initial insights into the use of laughter in casual conversations and the employment of gestures to present rounded characters in Dickens, the findings also support the notion that there is a wealth of extra-lexical in-

formation that both transcribed corpora and fiction-based corpora provide when known absences are being investigated. The results presented here also highlight that there is a lot more valuable information that can be gleaned when including both *laughter* and *gestures* in any research into spoken discourses.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Alsop, S., & Nesi, H. (2014). The pragmatic annotation of a corpus of academic lectures. In N. Calzolari, K. Choukri, T. Declerck, H. Loftsson, B. Maegaard, J. Mariani, A. Moreno, J. Odijk, & S. Piperidis (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2014)*. Reykjavik, Iceland: European Language Resources Association (ELRA). Retrieved January 21, 2020, from http://www.lrec-conf.org/proceedings/lrec2014/index.html

Arbona, E., Seeber, K. G., & Gullberg, M. (2023). Semantically related gestures facilitate language comprehension during simultaneous interpreting. *Bilingualism: Language and cognition, 26*(2), 425–439. https://doi.org/10.1017/S136672892200058X

Azar, Z., Backus, A., & Özyürek, A. (2019). General- and language-specific factors influence reference tracking in speech and gesture in discourse. *Discourse Processes, 56*(7), 553–574. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2018.1519368

Brunner, M. L., Diemer, S., & Schmidt, S. (2017). '... okay so good luck with that ((laughing))?'—Managing rich data in a corpus of Skype conversations. *Studies in Variation, Contacts and Change in English, 19*. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://varieng.helsinki.fi/series/volumes/19/brunner_diemer_schmidt/

Bryant, G. A., Fessler, D. M. T., Fusaroli, R., Clint, E., Aarøe, L., Apicella, C. L., ... Zhou, Y. (2016). Detecting affiliation in colaughter across 24 societies. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 113*(17), 4682–4687. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1524993113

Burger, S., Laskowski, K., & Wölfel, M. (2008). A comparative cross-domain study of the occurrence of laughter in meeting and seminar corpora. In N. Calzolari, K. Choukri, B. Maegaard, J. Mariani, J. Odijk, S. Piperidis, & D. Tapias (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2008)*. Marrakech, Morocco: European Language Resources Association (ELRA). Retrieved April 6, 2024, from http://www.lrec-conf.org/proceedings/lrec2008/

Debreslioska, S., & Gullberg, M. (2020a). The semantic content of gestures varies with definiteness, information status and clause structure. *Journal of Pragmatics, 168*, 36–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.06.005

Debreslioska, S., & Gullberg, M. (2020b). What's new? Gestures accompany inferable rather than brand-new referents in discourse. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, Article 1935. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01935

Debreslioska, S., & Gullberg, M. (2022). Information status predicts the incidence of gesture in discourse: An experimental study. *Discourse Processes, 59*(10), 791–827. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2022.2085476

Devereux, P. G., & Ginsburg, G. P. (2001). Sociality effects on the production of laughter. *The Journal of General Psychology, 128*(2), 227–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221300109598910

Duguid, A., & Partington, A. (2018). Absence: You don't know what you're missing. Or do you? In C. Taylor, & A. Marchi (Eds.), *Corpus approaches to discourse: A critical review* (pp. 38–59). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315179346-3

Gullberg, M. (2006). Handling discourse: Gestures, reference tracking, and communication strategies in early L2. *Language Learning, 56*(1), 155–196. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0023-8333.2006.00344.x

Gullberg, M., & Holmqvist, K. (2006). What speakers do and what addressees look at: Visual attention to gestures in human interaction live and on video. *Pragmatics & Cognition, 14*(1), 53–82. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1075/pc.14.1.05gul

Hanks, E., & Egbert, J. (2022). The interplay of laughter and communicative purpose in conversational discourse: A corpus-based study of British English. *Corpus Pragmatics, 6*, 261–290. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41701-022-00128-5

Jorgensen, J. (2019). The most beautiful of all: A quantitative approach to fairy-tale femininity. *Journal of American Folklore, 132*(523), 36–60. https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.132.523.0036

Love, R., Dembry, C., Hardie, A., Brezina, V. and McEnery, T. (2017). The Spoken BNC2014: Designing and building a spoken corpus of everyday conversations. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 22*(3): 319-344. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.22.3.02lov

Ludusan, B., & Schuppler, B. (2022). To laugh or not to laugh? The use of laughter to mark discourse structure. In *Proceedings of the 23rd Annual Meeting of the Special Interest Group on Discourse and Dialogue* (pp. 76–82). Edinburgh, UK: Association for Computational Linguistics. https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2022.sigdial-1.8

Mahlberg, M. (2007). Clusters, key clusters and local textual functions in Dickens. *Corpora, 2*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2007.2.1.1

Mahlberg, M. (2012). *Corpus Stylistics and Dickens's Fiction*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203076088

Mahlberg, M., Smith, C., & Preston, S. (2013). Phrases in literary contexts: Patterns and distributions of suspensions in Dickens's novels. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 18*(1), 35–56. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.18.1.05mah

Mahlberg, M., Conklin, K., & Bisson, M. J. (2014). Reading Dickens's characters: Employing psycholinguistic methods to investigate the cognitive reality of patterns in texts. *Language and Literature, 23*(4), 369–388. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947014543887

Mahlberg, M., Stockwell, P., Joode, J. D., Smith, C., & O'Donnell, M. B. (2016). CLiC Dickens: Novel uses of concordances for the integration of corpus stylistics and cognitive poetics. *Corpora, 11*(3), 433–463. https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2016.0102

Mahlberg, M., Wiegand, V., & Hennessey, A. (2020). Eye language–body part collocations and textual contexts in the nineteenth-century novel. In L. Fesenmeier, & I. Novakova (Eds.), *Phraséologie et stylistique de la langue littéraire/Phraseology and stylistics of literary language: Approches interdisciplinaires/Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 143–176). Berlin: Peter Lang.

McEnery, T., Love, R., & Brezina, V. (2017). Introduction: Compiling and analysing the Spoken British National Corpus 2014. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 22*(3), 311–318. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.22.3.01mce

Nesi, H. (2012). Laughter in university lectures. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 11*(2), 79–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2011.12.003

Pace-Sigge, M. (2015). *The function and use of TO and OF in multi-word units*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137470317

Partington, A. (2006). *The linguistics of laughter: A corpus-assisted study of laughter-talk*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203966570

Partington, A. (2008). From *Wodehouse* to the *White House*: A corpus-assisted study of play, fantasy and dramatic incongruity in comic writing and laughter-talk. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics, 4*(2), 189–213. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10016-008-0013-3

Partington, A. (2011). 'Double-speak' at the White House: A corpus-assisted study of bisociation in conversational laughter-talk. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research, 24*(4), 371–398. https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2011.023

Partington, A. (2014). Mind the gaps: The role of corpus linguistics in researching absences. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 19*(1), 118–146. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.19.1.05par

Scott, M. (2023). *WordSmith Tools* (Version 8). Stroud: Lexical Analysis Software. Available at: https://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/#gsc.tab=0

Sinclair, J. (2004). *Trust the Text*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203594070

Smitten, J. R. (1979). Gesture and expression in eighteenth-century fiction: 'A sentimental journey'. *Modern Language Studies, 9*(3), 85–97. https://doi.org/10.2307/3194283

Stockwell, P., & Mahlberg, M. (2015). Mind-modelling with corpus stylistics in *David Copperfield*. *Language and Literature, 24*(2), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947015576168

Truong, K. P., & Trouvain, J. (2012). Laughter annotations in conversational speech corpora: Possibilities and limitations for phonetic analysis. *Proceedings of the 4th International Workshop on Corpora for Research on Emotion Sentiment and Social Signals* (ES3 2012; pp. 20–24). Paris: European Language Resources Association (ELRA). Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://research.utwente.nl/en/publications/laughter-annotations-in-conversational-speech-corpora-possibiliti