

Book review

Zolczer, P., Litovkina, T., Barta, A., Puskás, A. (eds.) *Humour in Contemporary Societies. Eruditio – Educatio* 2014/3. Volume 9. 144 pp.

This special issue of *Eruditio – Educatio*, the research journal of the Faculty of Education of J. Selye University, Slovakia, brings together 12 scholars from varied fields of linguistics, literary, communication and folklore studies, sociology and education. Entitled *Humour in Contemporary Societies*, it contains nine articles and three book reviews, intending to reflect the diversity of humour research in Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia. Discussing genres such as joke, anti-proverb, satirical poem, comedy, novel, short story and comic strip, the contributors present different (quantitative and qualitative, descriptive and cognitive) approaches to them. The guest editors are also authors or co-authors of the issue that addresses certain aspects of American, Croatian, Hungarian, Japanese and Swiss humour.

In the first article, Judit Hidasi collects some ‘Humour capsules from Japan’, that is, a couple of grotesque Japan-related short stories taken from her own intercultural experiences and other sources. Speaking Japanese but, as a Hungarian, representing the Western way of thinking, she often found herself in embarrassing situations when engaging in conversation with Japanese people. The grotesque humour of such interactions was by no means intentional. She emphasises that being not as co-operative and straightforward as expected by a European or American interlocutor may be normal from the perspective of the Japanese culture which has been commonly characterised as collectivist, high-context and consensus-seeking. The Japanese tend to sacrifice their individual preferences and conveniences for maintaining and enhancing human relationships, and convey unspoken messages. Foreigners should be aware of the “social function” of their questions, their skill to avoid saying ‘no’, the meanings of their smile and giggle, etc. In other words, if one is a foreigner in Japan, one needs a well-developed Japanese pragmatic and, more broadly, communicative competence in order to be able to talk to them smoothly.

Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt’s article ‘The Basel Carnival: Where folklore meets humour’ challenges the general stereotype that the Swiss do not have a sense of humour. What she claims is that there are regional peculiarities and traditions in Switzerland’s 26 cantons, highlighting the Basel Carnival (*Fasnacht*), the three-day annual festival (the biggest one in Switzerland), taking place between February and March. By analysing three satirical poems from the 2014 Fasnacht in detail, she shows how the local associations and clubs (*Cliques*) elaborate the themes (*Sujets*) they choose for the Fasnacht, making fun of anything that has gone wrong or upset them during the last one year. Although local events are preferred, national and international issues (e.g. the NSA scandal) can be commented on critically as well. The author portrays the Basel humour as never crude but witty, sophisticated and sometimes black, citing the Swiss-born publicist, poet and writer Roger Bonner who sees the Basel sense of humour as somewhat similar to the British humour. She admits, however, that this kind of humour is unparalleled in Switzerland and in other German-speaking countries, and in spite of the Swiss people’s self-ironic attitude, there is no such a thing as “Swiss humour”.

The third and fourth articles deal with anti-proverbs. Anna T. Litovkina, one of the most outstanding researchers of this genre, provides a comprehensive picture of how wives are depicted in Anglo-American anti-proverbs (“‘Behind every man who lives within his income is a wife who doesn’t’: The figure of wife as revealed through Anglo-American anti-proverbs.”). Not surprisingly, the humour of such reformulations of some well-known proverbs, due to the male bias of the innovators, pushes certain negative traits into the forefront: bossiness, infidelity, greediness, nosiness, talkativeness, stupidity and the like. One of the typical anti-proverbs about wives is this: “Behind every successful man is a woman complaining she has nothing to wear”, an exaggerated generalisation of women’s desire for new clothes. The author’s conclusion is that the “ideal wife” is stereotyped in Anglo-American anti-proverbs as serving her husband and children diligently without having any rest, in contrast with the “real-life wives” who are bossy, manipulative and unfaithful creatures ruling and cheating on their husbands. She adds, importantly, that some proverb mutations aim to counterbalance the unfavourable image of wives fostered by the bulk of woman-related anti-proverbs.

Melita Aleksa Varga and Darko Matovac take a cognitive view of the anti-proverb phenomenon in their paper titled ‘Humour production and appreciation of Croatian-speaking individuals on the example of anti-proverbs’, explaining its humorous effect within the framework of conceptual integration theory. It is argued that the process of conceptual blending as a basic human cognitive ability plays a central role in creating and understanding unexpected variations of the old proverbs (e.g. *Tko tebe kamenom, ti njega kruhom* ‘Who hits you with a rock, hit him with bread’ → *Tko tebe kamenom, ti njega ciglom* ‘Who hits you with a rock, hit him with a brick’). A questionnaire was compiled to assess how this sort of humour is appreciated by the Croats according to their age, sex and level of education. The results indicate that there is a generation difference between the informants older than 30 years (who rated the anti-proverbs with lower grades) and the younger informants (who tend to rate them funny).

Andrea Puskás focuses on the ‘Postmodern humour in Woody Allen’s short stories’ written between 1975 and 1980. Postmodernism has been variously identified by attributes such as constructionism, diversity, decanonisation, hybridisation, fragmentation, indeterminacy and irony. Considered as incorporating these postmodern elements, much of the humour of Woody Allen’s stories is derived from the exploitation of clashes between the serious and the frivolous, the intellectual and the banal, the private and the public expectations, suggesting that there are no absolute truths and reliable solutions to the absurdity of everyday situations, but playfulness and laughter can let off the steam of our frustration. Special attention is devoted to the interactive narrator of the stories whose informal style may remind the reader of a stand-up comedian, bringing the narrative closer to popular culture.

Erik Dobrovodský in his paper ‘The comic and the academic: David Lodge’s campus novels’ offers insight into the genre of academic or campus novel emerged in America in the late 1940s and exemplified in this article by the British writer David Lodge’s *Campus Trilogy: Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975), *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988). The closed world of the academic staff with its own values, norms and intrigues is viewed through a satirical lens, placing the story in the setting of a fictional English city called Rummidge. In the first book of the trilogy, humour comes from the contrast between British and American culture represented by the main characters’ personalities and combined with situational comedy. The second one parodies the rapid spread of globalisation, and uses satire to question the quality of conferences as opportunities for free vacations. The third part of the trilogy is less saturated with humour, but makes a

comic comparison between the mentality of the members of the academic and economic spheres.

Györgyi Géro and Péter Barta investigate ‘The popular and urban roots of Hungarian joke’. They draw attention to the fact that Hungarian humour went through significant changes in the 20th century. The older layer of humorous folklore traditions traces back to the popular funny stories developed among the peasantry, but “the Budapest joke” is a genre of urban oral folklore evolved only in the last decades of the 19th century within an ethnically and socially heterogeneous and continuously varying cultural environment. The authors divide Hungarian jokes into several thematic categories on the basis of the stereotyped ethnic groups (Gypsies, Jews, Székelys/Szeklers, Scots), social classes (aristocrats), professions (policemen, doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers) and other typical characters (children jokes, blonde jokes, marital status jokes, political jokes and humorous anecdotes). More than half of the jokes gathered in eight Hungarian joke collections used as data sources for the study belong to marital status and children jokes. However, animal jokes, which are also popular in Hungary, are left unmentioned.

Peter Zolczer’s article is about ‘The constraints of translating humour in audiovisual media’. He conducts a qualitative research concentrating on the synchronisation of the dubbing with the lip and body movement of the actors speaking on screen. The corpus of the analysis consists of 10 humorous scenes culled from different episodes of the American sitcom *Friends*. As he stresses, the translatability of the humorous load of the selected scenes is one thing, and the feasibility of the audiovisual translation is quite another. The task of dubbing, even if we have a very good translation for a humorous dialogue, cannot be done perfectly without considering the lip movement and other expressive channels of communication. Zolczer’s results show that in 6 out of 10 cases the evaporation of the humorous load was caused by the constraint that the translation needs to be synchronised with the lip movement of the character. Nevertheless, in certain cases the loss of the source-language humour in the target-language version can be compensated by a slight alteration of the context.

In her paper ‘Toward the understanding of humorous metaphors and metonymies in the EFL setting’, Draženka Molnar recommends that teachers of English language integrate humour and figurative language into their programme so as to improve students’ linguistic and pragmatic competence, encouraging them to use English more confidently and imaginatively. There is, of course, nothing new in the recognition that tropes and humour often go hand-in-hand, but the cognitive mechanisms involved in understanding them have almost always been studied and taught separately so far. The author believes that the EFL learners, becoming aware of the conceptual motivation of visual materials such as humorous comic strips, will progress faster in vocabulary acquisition, interpretation and retention. She would let students explore, for example, that the figurative (and humorous) use of colour terms are, as cognitive theorists hold, products of our conceptual system motivated by metaphor, metonymy and generally shared knowledge.

Overall, this issue of *Eruditio – Educatio*, shedding new light on many facets of *Humour in Contemporary Societies*, can be seen as an intriguing kaleidoscope of the growing body of Central and Eastern European humour research. Rather than providing a full-fledged methodology, the contributors open up thought-provoking questions and stimulate the readers to discover a new aspect of what they believe to be familiar with. The findings of the articles are of interest to researchers and teachers fascinated by humour, and have implications for both future studies and pedagogical applications.

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