

Book review

Lundquist, Lita Sander (2020). *Humorsocialisering: Hvorfor er danskerne (ikke) så sjove (som de selv tror)?* Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

My dictionary translates the Danish word *hyggelig* as ‘comfortable’ or ‘cosy’, but for me the word conjures up images of evenings spent before log fires in the middle of the Danish winter with the curtains closed, with good companions, fellowship and candles. It means so much more than ‘cosy’. The German word *gemütlich* comes close to it. If when leaving to go home after dinner in an English house, you wish to thank your host, you might say “thank you for a lovely evening” or even “thank you for an interesting evening”; never would you say thank you for a “cosy evening”. In Denmark, the best compliment you can choose is “tak for en hyggelig aften”.

The language, as Lita Lundquist points out, is shaped by social circumstances, and in consequence humour is not always understood by non-Danish speakers who have no knowledge of how Danish society works. She gives some examples of where humour has failed to be perceived as humour: a police officer checking passports at an airport notices that a Serbian lady has a lip piercing and remarks “You have something in your lip”. Lundquist makes the assumption that this was an attempt at being jovial, but it was not understood as such. It could, of course, have been an expression of disapproval of body piercings. She does not appear to have been able to ask the official himself so there is no way of knowing. A Mr. Wu from Shanghai was told that he should divorce his wife and marry a Dane, if he wanted to learn Danish. Again, it is assumed that this was an attempt to be humorous but Mr. Wu did not find it funny. A French person was told that the reason Danes were thought to be the happiest of people was because of their excessive use of alcohol and sex, and failed to understand that this was a joke. It may be hard to believe that anyone from whatever country could take any of these remarks seriously, but, according to Lundquist, non-Danish speakers did. I would need far more examples to be convinced.

There are references to humourists from previous ages and classical theories of humour, with figures who may be surprising to those who are not humour scholars – Plato, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Freud, to name but a few and among Danish authors Søren Kierkegaard and Harald Høffding. There are no detailed analyses of such writers, but this might be a useful book as a starting point for anyone wanting to take up humour scholarship.

Lundquist compares Danish humour with what she says is prevalent in France. The French rely on word play, on *bons mots*, *jeux de mots*, *jeux d’esprit*, whereas Danish humour relies more heavily on irony or *selvironi* (I will be translating this word as ‘self-deprecating humour’ since we have no equivalent word in English). In French jokes, the target is almost always another person or institution; in Denmark, the target could well be oneself. There are also in Denmark fewer distinctions between the sphere of work and private life. A French woman working in Denmark observed “Her i Danmark kan man have det sjovt med chefen” (‘Here in Denmark you can joke with your boss’). But she also observed that Danes could be very rough in their dealings with each other.

Lundquist compares Danish humour to that of the French, as France is the country she knows best. Danes, she says, are more democratic in their behaviour: after the war of 1864 over Schlesvig Holstein, Danes realised that their country was small and vulnerable and class distinctions were blurred as they tried to pull together. There is a tradition of sitting together around a camp fire and telling humorous tales –*lejrball*– whereas she attributes the more formal expressions of word play in France to the aristocratic conventions of formality dating back to the court life under Louis XIV.

Lundquist has some interesting observations on how humour is used among members of the EU parliament. Here humour can be used as a mediator. There are many problems, however. Interpreters must translate what they hear. It is necessary for them to be able to see gestures and facial expressions as they help to indicate what feelings the speaker is trying to convey. If he becomes heated, so must the interpreter, albeit to a lesser degree. One strategy is for interpreters to mirror the speaker's body language, which can improve the quality of the translation, but to work on the basis that listeners can see the speaker and the interpreter is only filling in the one gap they have – language. But irony and double meanings and cultural references will inevitably be lost, especially where a translation is going through several languages before it reaches the Member of Parliament. For example, a speech may be translated from Czech to German, from the German to Danish. It may be too slow and the humour is lost: speed, precision and timing are essential for humour to work.

In Danish, there are small words such as *jo*, *mon*, *vist*, *nok*, *bare* or *vel*, which do not add anything substantial to the meaning but may indicate that a statement is not to be taken seriously. Thus *jamen, det var bare for sjov* could be translated as 'It was just a joke'. In French, there can be emphasis placed on intonation so it is possible to tell when something is a joke. Danish, however, may be perceived as 'flat', with no indication that a joke is coming.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this book concerns the work Lundquist has done with the EU parliament. There is room here for more research into how humour is used, how it can help to resolve conflicts and whether there can ever be a common European humour, transcending national habits, so that, for example, French vulgar or sexist humour will not be used. MEPs will have to un-learn some of their ways of joking and only use what will work for everyone.

This is a book which should be translated. Sadly, Danish is not commonly studied, being of little use outside Denmark. As to the question of whether Danes are as funny as they believe themselves to be, a Dane, using self-deprecating humour, would probably say "of course not", and s/he would not mean it.

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