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HUMOUR OF THE POLES AND OTHER EUROPEANS IN A TELEVISION PROGRAMME “EUROPE CAN BE LIKED”

The subject of this article is showing what the Poles and representatives of other European nations, first of all, from the European Union region, laugh at. The material which has been analysed is one episode of a television programme “Europe Can Be Liked”, entitled “A Sense of Humour” broadcast by Polish television on channel 2. In this episode the participants of the programme discuss what amuses people in their countries and talk about their own experiences. In TV listings the programme (comp. Ptaszek 2007: 35) has been described in the following way:

Entertaining programme in which young people from different countries of the European Union meet each other. In a cool atmosphere they talk about issues which are essential for every European: something which unites us, something which separates us or which is totally exotic. Each episode has its own guest-a celebrity who reveals some adventures and shares observations about the differences in everyday habits and customs of European nations.

Humour according to a dictionary definition is 1. *the ability to see an amusing side of life* and 2. *temporary state of temper, especially serene mood* (USJP v. 2: 63). In the issue of *Dictionary of Literary Terms* the authors highlighted another meaning of this term, referring to the process of transmission and perception of a work of Art: 1. *mental predilection, both creative and perceptive, for presenting life and art phenomena in a category of humour. It is the expression of benevolent or indulgent attitude towards various manifestations of ridiculousness and approving, free of mockery or derision, approach to life* (STL: 203).

However, not each phenomenon, event or human behaviour results in creating the same reaction in the recipient, may it be for the subjectivity of experiences or accurate ‘fitting of knowledge’ (Grabias 2005: 27). It is related to a sense of humour which depends on, so called, “common ground”, a linguistic term, defined as a set of judgments which is taken

for granted by the participants of the discourse (Karttunen, Peters 1979: 13–14; after Szczebrowski 1994: 37).

Humour is inextricably related to such terms as the comic (ridiculousness) and wit, differentiations between which have caused a great deal of problems throughout the centuries (comp. Bogołębska 2000: 323–329). Accompanying it such terms as: irony, travesty, parody, joke, or satire go beyond the scope of this article; therefore, some will be just mentioned, but most of them will be omitted.

In Polish research terminology, semantically broadest term is the term of the comic, treated as superior, in which elementary and compound comic is included (in form of benevolent humour, critical satire or mocking irony) (Dziemidok 1967).

D. Brzozowska pays attention to the terminological differences between Polish and English language where research into humour has developed most significantly; English humour is considered to be a superior category, whereas the closest equivalent of Polish humour is the comic which, however, applies more to the genre of drama (comedy).

History of the research into humour, beginning from the Ancient Times and ending in the 20th century has been widely reported in Polish linguistic literature by authors: J.S. Bystron (1960), B. Dziemidok (1967), D. Buttler (2003) and in more modern views, especially referring to English literature W. Chłopicki (1995), Brzozowska (2000). This field, known most frequently as humour research unites the results of different disciplines, e.g. psychology, philosophy, linguistics, culture studies etc. more and more distinctively going transforming into interdisciplinary views (comp. Gajda, Brzozowska 2000).

Various theories related to humour have been developed throughout the last two centuries. They can be encompassed in three largest groups: psychoanalytic, socio-behavioural and cognitively-perceptual theories, they refer, in turn, to the terms of: *relaxation, decline and cohesion*.

Generally, it can be said (after Brzozowska 2000: 20–25) that out of the relaxation theory a work of S. Freud is most known; the supporters of this opinion claim that laughter lets a human being free himself of energy surplus, gives relief and pleasure.

The theory which relates humour to decline, hostility, malice and aggression originates with Aristotle and his two views out of the 6 mentioned by Dziemidok (after Brzozowska 2000: 20): the theory of a negative feature of the comic object and the superiority of the experiencing humour subject. According to Aristotle, an error or distortion amuses, thus the comic is defined as something “which is incorrect and disgraceful but not painful or harmful”. A contemporary continuer of this theory, L. Feinberg (1982: 87, 110) claims that “an element of aggression is ubiquitous whenever we have to do with humour” and that is where ‘the secret of humour lies-in amusing aggression’ (STSzA 2001: 121–124).

The third of the theories, the theory of *non-coherence*, introduces humour based on the dissonance between something we expect and something we face. I. Kant was the first to express his view on non-coherence, the acknowledged cause of laughter. He claimed that “laughter is a passion whose source lies in a sudden transformation of tense anticipation into nothingness” (2004: 270, after: Geier 2007: 125). The subsequent supporters of this concept (H. Spencer, J. Bystroń and J. Trzadlowski) find it different from the norm which may be classified into the theory of non-coherence as it occurs between something which is normal and something abnormal. H. Bergson’s (1997) search of the reason for ridiculousness may be acknowledged as a specific interpretation of non-coherence theory. According to this author, laughter is caused by the collision of something which is alive with something automatic.

The above mentioned theories are not contradictory, but they complement each other as they describe the same phenomenon from different points of view. Theories based on non-coherence concentrate on a stimulus, theories of decline define relations between the transmitter and the recipient, whereas relaxation theories concentrate on mental feelings (Raskin 1985).

The tendency to interdisciplinary humour research has been described by A. Berger (1995: 106) in a following way: “one problem with these theories is that they don’t help us deal with specific jokes or other humorous texts, except in very broad terms.”

In the analysis of Polish linguistic humour, the most thoroughly discussed term is a joke (Buttler 2001; Brzozowska 2000, 2008) or a saying which includes the comic content – an anecdote, a joke stimulating to laugh (USJP: 683). D. Buttler (2001: 31) differentiates individual meanings of the joke into three elements: 1. all measures capable of transmitting the comic intention of the author, 2. all forms of conscious linguistic creativity of a humorous character, 3. precisely defined text structure of a steady composition, short and ending with a surprising pointa.

In the analysis of the selected TV programme I use the last meaning of the joke.

There are many divisions of humour into categories in literature; thus, in order to avoid accumulation, I will report only some of them e.g. Victor Raskin’s semantic theory of humour (1985) based on two elementary components. The first of which is lexicon, where the entire knowledge on words and their meanings that is at command of native speakers of the language is included. The second component, described as combined rules, “forms a semantic interpretation of the whole sentence out of the meanings of words which belong to the sentence” (comp. Chłopicki 1995) and on the base of a compound algorithm it recognizes whether a particular text belongs to a type of bona-fide (informative, everyday type of human communication) or to one type of non-bona-fide (occurring through an affirmation by combined rules of non-existence of bona-fide regular type): humour, lying or playing.

An elementary term of lexicon is the script which conveys certain semantic information and also a limited part of knowledge about the world. Individual words in a certain language evoke one or more scripts e.g. a word "doctor" evokes a script of a **PHYSICIAN** and a **SCIENTIST** (as a rule scripts are written with capital letters). There are a great many scripts known to native speakers of the language, but here are also scripts unknown to other people, but known to small groups of people, environments where they live e.g. family, relatives etc. According to the main hypothesis of Raskin, a text may be considered as a joke on two conditions:

1. the text is entirely or partially in agreement with two different scripts,
2. two scripts with which the text is in agreement are contradictory to one another.

Two scripts with which a text is in agreement overlap onto the text (Raskin 1985: 99).

The two conditions are necessary and sufficient for Raskin so that the text could be funny.

In joke classification, the main division encountered in works devoted to them is the division into verbal and subject (Cicerone), prose and poetic (Hocket 1972) or linguistic and reference or situational (Raskin 1985).

To the above mentioned terms one should add ethnic jokes, or such which apply to ethnic groups, conceived as communities, which have a sense of identity, distinctive culture features, occupying a territory known as a home-land and aware of their identity. This name may refer to large nations living in their own countries, national minorities or societies of the Diaspora (Posern-Zielinski). This kind of jokes, in an exaggerated way ascribe some human traits to certain ethnic groups, most frequently living on cultural, religious, linguistic or geographical outskirts of a certain nation (Davies 1990: 11–12). An ethnic joke itself is considered to be more amusing than the same joke, but without an ethnic element. Because they see life through stereotypes they might spread and establish prejudices against some groups, thus serve certain societies more than the others.

In an episode of the programme "Europe Can Be Liked", entitled "A Sense of Humour", such ethnic humour appears very frequently. Apparently, this occurs because of the participants of the programme who come from several European nations, and also the topic of the programme which forces to discover various sources of humour, seeing other nations through stereotypes, among them.

I understand stereotypes as D. Brzozowska sees them: "convictions, common for large societies, within a certain culture" which become an element of some importance in the knowledge inherited from generation to generation. They characterize by resistance to changes which does not mean that they do not occur within themselves.

The first example refers to a stereotype of a Polish drunkard who has been accused of overusing alcohol for ages (comp. Bartmiński 1993; Brzozowska 2008: 57), and in this programme is generalized as the whole Polish nation:

M.R.: Say, generally, what do you like about the Poles, and what irritates you, if anything at all?

K.A.: What I personally like in Poland, I'd say: Polish cuisine, but not like this... (he points at alcohol)

(laughter at the audience and applause)

Polish cuisine, or a set of dishes characteristic for a certain nation and frequently consumed by the people, has become reinterpreted as the delicacy of alcohol which, by stereotype, is considered to be overused by Polish citizens. The comic effect has been achieved by negation (Polish cuisine, but not like this...) thus, becomes the confirmation of a stereotype.

According to K. Wiczorek (2000: 23), suspension of natural evaluation, in this case, also of self-evaluation gives a possibility to laugh at unpleasant situations, one of which, undoubtedly, stereotypes of one's own nation are, especially when expressed by representatives of other nations.

Subsequent examples of humour are grounded on verbal jokes based on stereotypes. Such a perception of a Western neighbour of Poland is a vision of a German lacking in a sense of humour. It is related to a vision of a person who likes laughing which does not fit a stereotype of a German who values order (comp. Brzozowska 2008: 137). The guest of the programme, Joanna Bartel (J.B) tells such a joke about it:

J.B.: Well, but I've learnt how, especially in German, is "cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore, I am." In German it sounds like this:... "Denke, also bin ich." E! I call a familiar German, come here, sitzen platzen and listen, there will be a joke, e? A policeman is walking on a street and talking to himself, "I think, therefore, I am", no? "Denke, also bin ich." And he disappears.

M.R.: (laughter)

(laughter and the applause of the audience)

J.B.: Listen!

And this German says "Can you repeat that? You know, I didn't concentrate." I say "Ok, listen once again." A very stupid policeman is walking on a street and talking to himself: "I think therefore I am." And disappears.

And he says "What? Was there a hole in the road?"

(laughter of the audience and applause)

Another example of the same sort of stereotype (a German lacking in a sense of humour who cannot understand what they say to him) is a reply of Kevin Aiston (K.A.) to an ironic suggestion, a word from Steffen Moller. The suggested, by Steffen (S.M.), arrival of Kevin at a Polish children's home not as an employee but a child brought up in an orphanage, and an interjection of the host of the programme, Monika Richardson (M.R.) has been humorously responded by Kevin who applies to, the above mentioned, stereotype of a lacking in a sense of humour German- here interpreted as stupid, non-thinking.

K.A.: How have I learnt Polish? Err. Thanks to listening to Mr. Weis on the radio.

M.R.: Yes, there is someone like that.

K.A.: Yeah, it was eleven(sic!) years ago, cause I came... to Poland in ninety- (sic!) two.

S.M.: To a children's home? yeah?

K.A.: No

(laughter of the participants and the audience)

K.A.: only as arbeiten Sie at children's home

M.R.: Did you understand this?

K.A.: Well, I 'm going to pretend to be a German again, he doesn't understand anything. (laughter of the audience and applause)

In a reverse relation, when a German gives an opinion about the Poles, he reveals his lack of basic knowledge about this nation, its geographic location, culture etc. Such opinions are always funny for the Poles as they highlight a strong contrast between a statement that Poland lies in Asia and the fact that it is the largest country in mid-Europe, in addition, adjoining Germany. The source of humour is, thus, a glaring ignorance on Poland and the Poles from one of our closest neighbours.

S.M.: And I saw even a more exotic poster in Cracov, namely, sorry, exotic to me... "A course of a Polish language." I know that nobody is laughing now, but to me it looked exotic. And... I decided to go there and, actually, I did so, though everybody said "What do you want to do in Asia, are you crazy?"

The French laugh at the English; this stereotype is distinctive and based on strong, often negative experiences of both nations which originated many centuries ago. The citizens of France consider the English to be bad cooks who are not able to make even the simplest dish:

M.R.: Listen, how is it about a sense of humour in France, for instance? What are the French eager to laugh at?

O.B.: Well, generally, at the English.

(laughter and applause)

K.A.: If you ask the French...

O.B.: In France, English roast beef as even a piece of beef (sic!) they don't know how to make it hot, as simply as that.

O.B.: That's it.

M.R.: That's right.

The English also laugh at the French, especially at their cuisine which, for the English, is not bearable (sauce from frogs causes, suggested by Kevin, nausea). Misunderstandings between the two nations and the differences in mentality are well illustrated by a joke told by a London citizen, Kevin.

M.R.: Kevin, what is it that the English laugh at? Your turn.

K.A.: Not at all. At the French!

(laughter of the guests)

K.A.: Sauce from fryyyyogs frogs.

(laughter of the audience and the guests)

K.A.: Err I'll think of something in a minute. Yeah! I have it. I remember it. Yeah, the French goes to the father of his girlfriend, fiancé, and he speaks to the gentleman "Mister, I know that's only

formality, no, I'm only asking. Can I ask you for your daughter's hand? And the father... formality? Who, to hell, says it's formality? – Err... her gynecologist.

The Italians, in turn, laugh at an ethnic group, located on the outskirts of their country in relation to culture and the language. The object of the laughter is, most often, their co-native from the South whom Davies (1990: 11–12) shows as “non-genuine”, “worse” in the eye of the Italian from the North. In a situation which occurs at the television studio between the representatives of the two different regions – a direct participant of the programme from the South, and sitting at the audience Italian from the North, Paolo who disturbs his co-native while he is boasting of having the attributes of a genuine Italian.

A.A.: Thirty-four years, I'm called Antonio and I live in Warsaw and everybody calls me *Italiano vero*, I don't know why.

M.R.: Oooo, it means the genuine one... this...

A.A.: A genuine Italian and wakes up and sings such: *Italiano vero laciote ni cantare gla, gla, gla...* (Paolo from the audience) That's not true. He isn't an Italian, he is from Calabria.

Ethnic jokes also appear in Polish films (an extract is presented during the programme) and they base on stereotypes of nationalities which are particularly connected with Polish history. A group of jokes telling about the times of the Second World War belong to them. They present a positive auto stereotype of a Pole (comp. Brzozowska 2008: 47) and negative stereotypes of other nations, especially, taking part in the war.

M.R.: Have a look at one of the most beloved Polish series “How Did I Start The Second Word War?” which shows brief characteristics of a few European nations.

(The scene which describes the English)

- Sir, it seems that somebody is shooting
- The French from the League. After drinking tea, disarm him and capture him.
- Yes, Sir!

(The scene which describes the Poles and the French)

- I haven't pushed myself to the navy. I'm from infantry, want to fight Hitler, not coal into a cauldron. With Hitler, understand? Crash, crash.
- Crash, crash, oui.
- (a soldier to the commander in French.) He wants to fight Hitler.
- A..., for sure a Pole.

(The scene which describes the Italians)

- (in Italian) A minute ago a brothel was captured. They are chasing girls.
- Incredible.
- It's a disgrace for an Italian. We can't let anybody make cuckolds of us! *Avanti!*

These scenes show what the Poles laugh at when they talk about representatives of European nations which fought in the Second World War. In this shot an Englishman is phlegmatic, prefers drinking tea to attacking the enemy. The French is lazy, not eager to fight, whereas a Pole is perceived as a valorous enthusiast (comp. contradictory pairs of Raskin's scripts). In contrast, the Italian is a womanizer much more interested in being threatened with a shortage of women than war activities. These stereotypes are certainly historically grounded (Polish solitary opposition against German aggression in Europe in 1939 and negative perception of other European countries which did not involve in the fight), but nowadays they only amuse, confirming schematic thinking about the English, French and Italians.

The next kind of humour is a joke based on mistake, misunderstanding (distorted perception) of Polish language or its poor command – typical mostly for foreigners. An example of it is a report of a German, Steffen Moller who overlaps German inflectional phenomenon of not changing people's names (comp. Bogusz 2012) on understanding Polish language; thus, he becomes amusing when he interprets (through a relation to Italian language, then familiar to him) – "a" ending in Polish Genitive as the expression of feminization of Poland. A contrast between such a view and Polish traditionalism – mentioned by a participant of this programme – surprisingly pointed in the end is a cause to laugh.

S.M.: But I went to that Cracov. I remember while I was walking on the first day I came to Cracov on Florianska street to that language school. I didn't speak a word of Polish and I saw a big billboard "Dziewiąta symfonia Ludwika van Beethovena". I thought: "What is happening here in this Cracov? I think Cracov is a prudish catholic city and what is happening? Festival of modern feminine music. Because I was familiar a bit with Italian language. I (sic!), in Italian is that, wait a minute, Antonio, you can confirm that, all women have "a" in the end: Gina Lollobrigida Ludvika van Bethovena. I thought that.... (laughter of the audience)

S.M.: an extremely canny woman invented an artistic pseudonym in order to prove the guys that a woman also can write the ninth symphony!

For the Poles, auto irony is also a source of humour, though, it is not a commonly encountered measure of expression. In the following example, ridiculousness is a result of an amazing reinterpretation of numbers marking the date of great importance in Poland: a medieval battle during which the Polish army defeated the forces of the Teutonic Order. The year 1410 is a cause of national pride (Bartmiński, Panasiuk 1993; Brzozowska 2008: 47) and the date with which each Pole is familiar with. Joanna Bartel, however, recognizes numbers which create the date as a recipe for home-made vodka.

J.B.: Very good!

This is a recipe for vodka.

(laughter of the guests at the studio)

J.B.: Yes, well, one kilo of sugar, four liters of water and ten dg of yeast.

M.R.: Ha ha ha!

J.B.: 1410.

Another kind of humour which one can encounter in the programme is word play called pun. (comp. STL: 233) which, in this case, refers to a different segmentation of a name “Eugeniusz” (colloquially known as “Gienek”) or “Eugeniusz” which in context of the programme topic means “eu-” (European), “geniusz” (Eng. “genius”). This operation is simultaneously the comic explanation of Joanna Bartel’s incredible energy and enthusiasm (J.B.) That refers to the phonetic similarity between two different words: “genius” and “gene” (J.B.: “genes from my mum and father”) – remarkable abilities and hereditary features inherited from someone’s parents.

M.R.: Joanna, where have you got so much energy and enthusiasm from?

J.B.: Firstly, I derive it from other people, secondly, I have such genes from my mum and father, because dad was called “Gienek”.

(laughter at he audience)

M.R.: Err... He is called Gienek, yeah?

J.B.: Eugeniusz.

M.R.: So, that’s where energy comes from?

J.B.: Of course, genius.

M.R.: Aha! I’ve caught it.

Finally, summarizing the presented examples of jokes, one can note that the programme and its intention constitutes a negation of negative stigmatization by stereotype which hinders communication between certain groups. According to K. Skarżyńska (2005: 62): “Intercultural barriers might be overcome only by mutual recognition, opening towards other perspectives, studying foreign languages, customs and values” (p. 62) A stereotype, given in a form of a joke which provokes a confrontation of knowledge about a certain issue, nation etc., may be – obviously, with a distinctively stressed intention – the source of recognition and opening towards different, previously unknown perspectives, values or culture.

The presented in the programme examples of humour show that Polish people and representatives of other European countries laugh in various situations at: misunderstandings, linguistic errors deliberate or not, among them of foreigners’, family stories told or heard. Humour itself, in that case, fulfills a ludic, playful function, but first of all its cognitive function is essential in this programme – giving sometimes stereotyping, sometimes individual knowledge about Europeans, their way of thinking and exploring the world or coping with difficult situations. A fairly important role, considering its character and the target of the programme, broadcast in March 2003 (overcoming stereotypes, fears and reluctance of the Poles to join the European Union in 2004) one can perceive in showing Europeans through such an entertaining approach in order to change a negative attitude of the society towards this controversial issue and using oblique persuasion. Humour shows also that the language is a living creature which undergoes different operations, distortions, experiments or modifications and still reveals its richness, interpretative possibilities and applications into different situations.

1. Explanation of the abbreviations:

- STL – Słownik terminów literackich – Dictionary of Literary Terms
- STSzA – Argumenative art. Dictionary of Terminological Terms
- USJP – Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego – Universal Dictionary of Polish Language

The guest of the programme:

- J.B. – Joanna Bartel (Poland)

2. Participants:

- O.B. – Olivier Boudon (France)
- K.A. – Kevin Aiston (Great Britian)
- S.M. – Steffen Moller (Germany)
- A.A. – Antonio Angotti (Italy)
- P.C. – Paolo Cozza (Italy)
- J.L. – Judit Lencse-Mucha (Hungary)

3. The Host leading the programme:

- M.R. – Monika Richardson (Poland)

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Summary

The article takes up the issue of humour. Text shows that Polish people and representatives of other European countries laugh in various situations at: misunderstandings, linguistic errors deliberate or not, among them of foreigners', family stories told or heard. Humour itself, in that case, fulfills a ludic, playful function, but first of all its cognitive function is essential in this programme – giving sometimes stereotyping, sometimes individual knowledge about Europeans, their way of thinking and exploring the world or coping with difficult situations. A fairly important role, considering its character and the target of the programme, broadcast in March 2003 (overcoming stereotypes, fears and reluctance of the Poles to join the European Union in 2004) one can perceive in showing Europeans through such an entertaining approach in order to change a negative attitude of the society towards this controversial issue and using oblique persuasion. Humour shows also that the language is a living creature which undergoes different operations, distortions, experiments or modifications and still reveals its richness, interpretative possibilities and applications into different situations.