

6.

International Laughter — The logic of Stereotypes

Abstract:

National inter-deriding is a dominant genre of jokes. They come as statements, dialogues, or anecdotes. They attach schemas to categories in stereotypical ways and have specific functions in communication. We will go through a series of examples.

On a website dedicated to Nationality Jokes, we find this summary by a journalist:

“Here, then, as a service to future presidents of the European Union, is the Uteley Guide to the National Characteristics of the Peoples of Europe:

Belgians: mad, boring. Frenchmen: arrogant, chauvinistic, garlic-breathed. Germans: humourless, ruthless, efficient, greedy. Spaniards: lazy, hot-tempered, bloodthirsty. Irishmen: drunk, lazy, self-pitying, dishonest. Italians: volatile, sleazy, vain. Swedes: sex-obsessed, robotic, conformist. Greeks: smelly, hirsute, untrustworthy. Austrians: fat, wannabe Germans. Finns: pessimistic, sun-starved, suicidal. Dutchmen: clog-wearing, tulip-fancying dope addicts. Portuguese, Danes, Luxembourgese: too insignificant to bother about. The Brits: upright, honest, fair-minded (excluding the Scots, who are mean and belligerent, and the Welsh, who are blathering windbags) ... before I am dragged off and lynched, I would like to make it clear that there are huge numbers of exceptions to these generalizations.

— Tom Uteley, "The Daily Telegraph" [British]

As a Dane, I am proud of sharing with the Portuguese and the Luxembourgese the condition of not reserving any deriding predicate; we should thus be in optimal conditions for conducting a study of the way in which people laugh at other people nation by nation. Laughter is emotional. As the above list shows, there is a direct path between emotion and predicate, but no clear connection between predicates to same subject (Belgians mad, yet boring?!). The choice of predicate is apparently determined by the speaker's need to express varieties of emotions, such as contempt, disgust, pity, offence ...; the speaker's own grounding seems given by the contrast to these profiles (Brits: upright... – which might reflect the emotional value of pride).

However, the text of the predication matters to the force of the expression. So, let us take a look at the textual sub-genres involved. Three categories seem particularly productive: *statements*, *dialogues*, and *anecdotes*.

One first sub-genre of *national inter-deriding* (NID) is the simple *statement*.
Examples by the abominable bigmouth P.J. O'Rourke from Ohio:

1a. The French are sawed-off sissies who eat snails and slugs and cheese that smells like people's feet. Utter cowards who force their own children to drink wine, they gibber like baboons even when you try to speak to them in their own wimpy language. The French are a smallish, monkey-looking bunch and not dressed any better, on average, than the citizens of Baltimore. True, you can sit outside in Paris and drink little cups of coffee, but why this is more stylish than sitting inside and drinking large glasses of whiskey I don't know.

1b. Paraguay: Nowhere and famous for nothing.

American NID is particular by its direct self-enhancing and grotesque hyperbole. But there are European examples:

2. Belgium: A country invented by the British to annoy the French. (Charles de Gaulle).

3. The Irish are a fair people – they never speak well of one another. (Samuel Johnson).

4. The English are not very spiritual people, so they invented cricket to give them some idea of eternity. (George Bernard Shaw).

5. The reason we British have the word *queue* is that the French had no further need of it. (Alexander Walker).

And here is a French response to (1), sort of:

6. Maintenant, les Américains ont trois héros. Superman qui survole les tours, Spiderman qui les escalade et les musul-man qui les traversent ! (Dimitri).

NID of the type (1a,b) are special by simply expressing what the linguistically innocent and easily intimidated American feels. NID of the type (2 – 6) are instead *ironic*, not just hyperbolic, a feature that gives these a certain advantage as concerns NID force. Here is, however, an American statement with at least a certain theatrical twist:

7. Haggis is a black pudding eaten by the Scots and considered not only a delicacy but fit for human consumption. The minced heart, liver and lungs of a sheep are mixed with oatmeal and boiled in the sheep's stomach before ... Excuse me a minute ... (Mithrandir).

A second sub-genre of NID is the *dialogue* by Q&A, which has to be brief.

8. Q. Why do the French eat snails? A. It gives them speedier reactions. (Anonymous)

9. Q. Que faire si la fin du monde est prévue pour demain ? A. Va en Roumanie, ils sont toujours 300 ans derrière. (Anonymous)

10. Q. Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas de fantôme en Belgique ? A. Tu as déjà vu un belge avoir de l'esprit ? (An.)

11. Q. Qu'est-il écrit dans les bus italiens ? A. Ne parlez pas au chauffeur, il a besoin de ses mains. (An.)

Here is one that offers an entire cascade of Q&A structures on one (very French) idea; and it is of course sexual:

12. Q. Comment s'appelle un portugais qui se masturbe ? A. Manuel. Q. Comment s'appelle un portugais qui se masturbe debout ? A. Manuel Sanchez. Q. Comment s'appelle un portugais qui se masturbe debout sur la plage ? A. Manuel Sanchez Da Costa. Q. Comment s'appelle un portugais qui se masturbe debout sur la plage avec deux cents autres portugais ? A. Manuel Sanchez Da Costa Dos Santos.

Some Q&A are comparative :

13. Q. Comment identifier la nationalité des visiteurs du Mondial de l'Automobile ? A. – L'Allemand regarde le moteur. – L'Anglais regarde les cuirs. – Le Suisse regarde le coffre. – L'Italien regarde le klaxon. – L'Américain regarde la taille. – Le Chinois regarde tout. – Le Belge ne regarde rien. – Le Français regarde la vendeuse. (An.)

14. Q. Quel sont les plus petits livres du monde ? A. – Les meilleures recettes de la cuisine anglaise. — Le livret A roumain. — Le catalogue des voyages de l'ex-Allemagne de l'Est ...

The third basic sub-genre is the *anecdote*. The following example is difficult to translate, and again sexual:

15. C'est une portugaise qui va porter plainte à la police française. " J'étais dans le buche, quand tu lui passagé y mon violé " – " Vous n'avez pas essayé de vous débattre ? " – " Mai si, jousteman ! Je leur disai : " Laiché moi, laiché moi !) (Thomas Lebert)

The following example is Franco-British and again sexual:

16. Au tribunal le juge s'adresse à l'accusé : " J'ai vu dans ma vie d'horribles personnages, mais des comme vous, c'est la première fois. Vous vous rendez compte de ce que vous avez fait ? ... Violent une morte, c'est épouvantable. " – Mais je ne savais pas qu'elle était morte, Votre Honneur... Je croyais que c'était une Anglaise. "

The anecdote uses the formulaic and triadic format, which allows both for a theatrical display of provocation and counter-provocation, and for comparison and contrast:

17.

Dans un hotel, en France, un touriste français prend tranquillement son petit déjeuner : café, croissant, baguette, beurre et confiture. Un touriste américain mâchant son chewing gum s'installe en face de lui. Bien que le Français l'ignore, l'Américain engage la conversation :

– L'Américain : Vous les Français, vous mangez tout le pain ? – Le Français (de mauvaise humeur) : Oui. – L'Américain (après avoir fait une grosse bulle avec son chewing gum) : Nous en Amérique, on mange juste l'intérieur. La croûte, on la met dans des containers, on recycle en faisant des croissants et on les vend aux Français.

– L'Américain a un petit sourire sur le visage, le Français écoute en silence. – L'Américain persiste : Vous mangez la confiture avec le pain ? – Le Français : Oui. – L'Américain (une grosse bulle éclate sur sa figure

et d'un coup de langue habile, il ravale son chewing gum et continue à mâcher) : Nous pas. En Amérique, on mange des fruits frais au petit déjeuner. Et on met les pelures dans des containers, on les recycle en faisant de la confiture et on la vend aux Français.

– Le Français demande alors : Faites-vous l'amour en Amérique ? – L'Américain : Yeah bien sûr, très souvent, dit-il avec un large sourire. – Le Français : Et que faites-vous des préservatifs utilisés ? – L'Américain : Et bien comme tout le monde, on les jette. – Le Français : Pas nous. Une fois utilisés, on les recycle dans des containers, on en fait du chewing gum et on le vend aux Américains...

18.

A un congrès d'émancipation de la femme, la première à prendre la parole est allemande : – Bonjour, mon nom est Birgit, et j'ai avisé mon mari : Helmut, prépare le dîner ! Le 1er jour, je n'ai rien vu, le 2ème jour non plus, mais au bout du 3ème, Helmut me prépara le dîner. APPLAUDISSEMENTS ET OVATION GENERALE : BRAVO !!!!!

C'est au tour d'une Italienne : – Bonjour, je m'appelle Isabella, et j'ai dit à mon mari : Luigi, à partir de demain, tu nettoies toi-même la maison. Le 1er jour, je n'ai rien vu, le 2ème jour non plus, mais le 3ème, Luigi avait passé l'aspirateur. APPLAUDISSEMENTS ET OVATION GENERALE : BRAVO !!!!!

C'est au tour d'une Talibane : – Bonjour, mon nom est Yasmina et j'ai dit à mon mari : Oussama, repasse le linge, fainéant !!! Le 1er jour, je n'ai rien vu, le 2ème jour non plus, mais le 3ème, j'ai commencé à revoir un peu de l'oeil gauche !

The first set (1 – 12) are *farces*; these texts are scripts for an oral performance playing the silly stranger, to the delight of the non-stranger.¹ The general semantic effect of (13 – 18) is – apart from letting sexual references occur – to activate certain *stereotypes* that characterize nations, cultures, ethnicities, etc. Whereas the farces enact these stereotypes theatrically, the more developed jokes contain punch-rhythmic, implicit (metonymic) manifestations of the stereotypical predication.

A *stereotype* connects a category and a schema. *Categories* – for example, of animal species, personal professions, gender, age, nationality, religion, race... – come with intrinsic 'affordances', i.e. typical things they do as agents or allow agents to do, so that categorization can prepare the categorizer for interacting with the categorized individuals. These affordances are schematic; but in stereotypes, they are reduced to a *single predominant schema*. Stereotypic reduction mainly occur in cognition focusing on persons and person-like living and sentient, intentional beings; the reason may be that such beings are dangerously versatile and multi-affording, and therefore call for fixation of a *pseudo-belief* – colored by the negative emotional charge that created the reduction.

¹ Dialogue: – Have you heard the one about the Swiss who... – Just a moment, I am Swiss! – It doesn't matter, I will tell it slowly.

Why a pseudo-belief? Except in cases of overt racism, psychosis, and similar mental deformations, human minds in fact do not openly believe in the stereotypic characterization of the targeted being. We know that gender jokes manifest the same stereotypes about men and women that actual women and men only express when having an ‘argument’ and being aggressive ("You women always...", "You men never..."), but not when they are calm and rational. We nurture rational beliefs and stereotypic pseudo-beliefs about the same target items; these predicative systems are contradictory but parallel and curiously do not neutralize each other. Thus, we cannot eliminate a stereotype by rational debate and empirical research. We know, for example, that ‘blondes’ are not particularly stupid, but we enjoy the stereotype of the ‘blonde who comes into a bar and...’

We are embodied intentional beings and need to be able to adapt to other such beings in ‘online’ interaction and communication. Stereotypes play a strange role in this adaptation: *individual slandering* whereby S1 addresses S2 while offering a negative image of an absent S3, in fact attunes S2 to S1. Emotional attunement is obtained by a symbolic ‘sacrifice’ of S3. Stereotypes reproduce this mechanism collectively: the group {S1} attunes to a group {S2} by stereotyping an ‘out-group’ {S3}. In both cases, {S3} has to be an entity of considerable prestige and importance in the shared context of S1 and S2.

We manage to pay careful attention to each other's richly faceted properties, to the extent that we attend symbolically to an ‘exclusion’ of another—other, the other-of-the-other, S3.² The mechanism is of course ethically problematic and yet it seems pragmatically unproblematic: to S1, it is shameful (mistreatment of S3) and joyful (empathic to S2). This emotional complex is inherent in the physiology and phenomenology of laughter and humor.

We are naturally alert to others, individual or collective, and since we act under the pressure of situational time, not only must attunement happen instantaneously, it also has to lead to appropriate instantaneous acts; we have to attune emotionally. This attunement in humans predominantly uses humor. And shared laughter based on stereotypes additionally fends off other stereotypes that would block the ongoing

² S3 can be S1 – self-deriding is a well-known special effect.

communication; so instead of laughing at each other, we introduce a target and thereby keep the scene of enunciation clear of direct stereotypical blockers.

In an intercultural network of national {S} groups, the Inter-Deriding will logically create a tacit network of stereotypes coextensive with the network itself. The two networks will be complementary: the stronger the laughter, the stronger the collaboration.

Postscript:

Then there is the pure pun, where language itself is the laughing-stock:

An agnostic, dyslexic, insomniac lies awake all night wondering if there's a dog.

It's hard to explain puns to kleptomaniacs. They always take things literally.

A Buddhist walks up to a hotdog stand and says "Make me one with everything.

