

Is the Unserious Serious? National Traits behind a Comic Mask

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Abstract: The central focus of attention in the present research paper is constituted by humorous discourse as a valid source of ethnicity markers. What follows is that the analysis at hand is grounded in the ethnolinguistic findings on language, predominantly in that of language's and culture's bidirectional dependence and influence (Duranti 1997). It also remains in strict connection with the theory of discourse, understood as a combination of a particular text and its situational, social and cultural contexts (Chruszczewski 2009). The analysis of humorous discourse has been here narrowed down to the ethnic variety of verbal humour, since it most immediately links with both ethnicity and linguistics. Nonetheless, the preliminary assumption on which the research is based is that in all its instances (not only the ethnic or verbal ones) humour reveals the specific features of a given speech community's culture. In the present paper, the introduced analysis constitutes just a working version of an ethnolinguistic methodology for humour analysis which I aim to develop in the future. For its main tools, it is to employ both certain elements from the socio-cultural perspectives of language study (Wierzbicka's [1999] *cultural scripts*, Tabakowska's [2001] *ethnocentrism*, or Davies' [1990] *script oppositions*) and more linguistically oriented deliberations (such as Raskin's [1985] *semantic scripts* and *humour competence*, or Kreidler, Drechler and Kreidler's [1988] *meaning dimensions*).

Keywords: humorous discourse, ethnolinguistics, ethnic humour scripts, the Americans vs. the British

Poles have no culture, Americans are boastful,
Germans are obedient and the English – reserved.
No, it's the Americans who have no culture.
Poles are simply stupid and dirty. Germans are megalomaniac.
And the English - gravely serious. Poles? They are canny.
Americans are megalomaniac, while Germans are grave.
And among the English, humour and
lack of seriousness is ever-present.¹

¹ The comparative listing of my authorship, based on Blake (2007), Davies (1990), Fox (2005), Paxman

The above characteristics are just examples of numerous ethnic scripts holding for the enumerated cultures in ethnic humour. The question of whether they are grounded in any empirical data at all, or are simply attributed to those ethnic groups completely by chance has been a matter of discussion among humour researchers for a long period of time. It has been assumed that the easily noticeable diversification, which might at times even lead to contradictory descriptions, obviously results from different experience the joke-originating groups have with particular target ethnicities and their attitudes towards them (Christie Davies 1990; Victor Raskin [1944] 1985; Barry J. Blake 2007), often being based on stereotypes. The system of beliefs praised by a given group also exerts a marked impact on the scripts, as traits ascribed to deprecated groups are usually those unaccepted ones in a given community (Davies 1990). Any attempts at establishing those humorous characteristics which actually do have a bearing in reality may prove as defeasible, since scholars not infrequently misinterpret the results for the causes or strain the facts to match the scripts.

The present paper is aimed at depicting the ways in which the American and the English ethnicity reveals itself by means of verbal humour. The paper constitutes a preliminary work for a future more elaborate research study on the humorous culture, or the cultural humour, of the English. The examples of jokes to be discussed come from the Czech, German and Polish languages, as well as from the American and English spheres of culture.² The traits assessed as dominating in them serve for a final comparative summary, the discussion of which is supported by anthropological evidence.

For introduction purposes it needs to be stated that the views on language as adopted in the present research may be summarized in Franz Boas' ([1911] 1964: 21) words who assessed language as "one of the most instructive fields of inquiry in an investigation of the formation of the fundamental ethnic ideas." According to him (Boas, *ibid.*) it is an inevitable outcome of the fact that the formulation of thoughts is conducted verbally. What follows from his observation is that ethnicity, the same way as history or art, needs to be encapsulated in a system and expressed (either

(1999), as well as on an analysis of a number of ethnic jokes concerning the nationalities in question.

² All the jokes, unless otherwise stated, have been adopted from such Web sites as the German <<http://witzze.net>>, Czech <<http://vtipy.legrace.cz>>, or Polish <<http://kawaly-o-anglikach.humoris.pl/>> (for more, see references).

outwardly or inwardly) for the rest of the world to recognize it. The question, however, of whether this statement may be equally valid for a *non-bona fide* language use, under which label verbal humour is often subsumed, remains an open one. In reference to Kate Fox's (2005) study on the English nation in which she pictures humour as an ever-present, default response to any social interaction, as a basic mean of dealing with, as she calls it, the English 'social dis-ease,' I am of the opinion that humour is as valid an ethnolinguistic source as is a political speech or a friendly chat. Alessandro Duranti (1997: 33) assumes that culture in order to be lived must be communicated and as the basic tool for communication is language, the adoption of this tool is parallel with culture expression. In my view, humour does constitute such a culture-bearing device, serving the reflection of traits of both its originator and its object. In short, what I would argue for is that humour, though in its essence relying on the lack of seriousness, is in fact a very serious and important source of ethnicity markers.

In this respect, I stand in opposition to scholars (e.g. Davies 1990) who object to finding hidden motifs underlying ethnic jokes, as, according to them, jokes provide an end in themselves and are "insights into how societies work – they are (...) social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on" (Davies 1990: 9), but they are not meant to regulate those societies or solve their problems. As assumed by the present research, jokes are not only passive reflecting tools. They simultaneously serve as active props for establishing interactions with other humans, like the weather talk, philosophical discussions or proclamations and, more importantly, as means of handling those interactions. The way I see it, what on the surface may appear as completely diverse discourses (e.g. political, religious, humorous³) amounts to a grand, unified system which a man carries and which carries a man, in one word – the language. What follows from the above, linguistic devices not only perform the role of the carrier of culture, but they also exert a marked impact upon it. Words are claimed to have a constitutive power, which already in antiquity found expression the belief in verbal magic and in avoidance of taboo words. Even in the present times, most cultures refrain from using certain linguistic areas, be it for the sake of respect (like the name of God among the Jews), decency (certain body parts or functions), politeness (swearwords), or fear of the expressed word becoming true (mentioning diseases, death, Satan, misfortunes). And in fact, if we consider official proclamations, knighting, court sentences or oaths in perhaps less "magical" terms, words do become reality on a regular basis.

³ "Humorous discourse" is a term employed by Chłopicki's (2006) or Davies (1990), but is not officially recognized by all the discourse scholars.

In sum, language may not be separated from human fears and hopes, beliefs and attitudes. It reflects them, and at the same time it may be either their source or a safety lifebelt. And, in the line of my argument, so is the case with ethnic humour. The question of whether an utterance is aimed at raising laughter, insulting or strengthening faith is irrelevant for its culture-bearing function.

Before moving to the core of this paper, that is, to the characteristics of the Americans and the English as seen in verbal ethnic humour, some fundamental remarks on the way humour itself is defined in the present work should be introduced. First of all, the ambivalent, elusive nature of humour needs to be underlined, as well as the thin boundary separating it from seriousness. Various criteria, such as that of laughter, smile, or wit, which assumedly are to accompany humour, are in fact not indefeasible. Furthermore, what for one may appear as amusing, for the other may be gravely serious.⁴ What may be stated with certainty is that humour is inherently a part of human behaviour, physical and mental. Its nature and characteristics, however, are highly specific, and actually the notion encompasses so vast a range of phenomena that it poses considerable problems for any attempts to define it. It has been referred to as “a play” and related with pleasure (Fry 1963: 138), or viewed as mental frame of therapeutic powers that serves relaxation (Mindess 1971: 21, 12). In contrast, it has also been perceived as a sinister sign of cowardice and indolence (Ludovici 1932: 12-13, 17). It is also claimed that it derives from hostility (Rapp 1951; Bergson 1899) or, quite oppositely, that it is the result of kindness (Leacock 1937; cited in Raskin 1985: 9). Considering such a discrepancy of features, the fact that it is hard to provide the definition of humour should not be surprising. And actually, for the writer George Bernard Shaw any attempt at writing about wit is parallel to the lack of having any (cited in Simpson 2003: 1). However, it is this exact discrepancy between pure entertainment and hostility that underlies the question posed in the title of this paper, which is whether ethnic humour is only an innocent linguistic means of amusement, for which ethnicity constitutes another perfect excuse, or a magnifying glass of cross-cultural relations and ethnic identity.

What prompted me to choose the Americans and the English for the objects of my preliminary research analysis were two recently found sets of classic anecdotes in the type of “Only in...” I read them separately by chance on the web, and only later

⁴ A perfect example is provided by one of my experiences at the cinema. During the screening of Mel Gibson’s 2004 movie, *The Passion of Christ*, the scene of flagellation caused an elderly lady sitting next to me to wail. At the same time, in the other end of the room, it led to bursts of laughter accompanied by inelegant remarks and mockery.

did I analyze them to discover that they are actually the same, but the last two points in the American section. The improbable conclusion which would derive from the sets would be that the two nations are virtually the same, but the treatment of veterans and the Braille lettering in ATMs. The question which first emerged was whether I personally associate both of these sets with the relevant nationalities.

Table 1.

A comparison of British and American traits in “Only in...” anecdotes.

Only in Britain	Only in America
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Only in Britain...are there disabled parking places in front of a skating rink. 2. Only in Britain...do banks leave both doors open and chain the pens to the counters. 3. Only in Britain...do people order double cheeseburgers, large fries, and a diet coke. 4. Only in Britain...do we leave cars worth thousands of pounds on the drive and put our junk in the garage. 5. Only in Britain...do Supermarkets make the sick people walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front. 6. Only in Britain...can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance. 7. Only in Britain...do we buy hot dogs in packs of ten and buns in packs of eight. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Only in America.....can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance. 2. Only in America.....are there handicap parking places in front of a skating rink. 3. Only in America.....do drugstores make the sick walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front. 4. Only in America.....do people order double cheese burgers, large fries, and a diet coke. 5. Only in America.....do banks leave both doors open and then chain the pens to the counters. 6. Only in America.....do we leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put our useless junk in the garage. 7. Only in America.....do we use answering machines to screen calls and then have call waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.

8. Only in Britain...do we use answering machines to screen calls and then have call waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.

9. Only in Britain...do we use the word 'politics' to describe the process of Government. 'Poli' in Latin meaning 'many' and 'tics' meaning 'bloodsucking creatures.'

8. Only in America.....do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.

9. Only in America.....do we use the word 'politics' to describe the process so well: 'Poli' in Latin meaning 'many' and 'tics' meaning 'bloodsucking creatures'.

10. Only in America.....do they have drive-up ATM machines with Braille lettering.

11. Only in America.....can a homeless combat veteran live in a cardboard box and a draft dodger live in the White House. (this was popular when Clinton was in office)

The conclusion was that most of these features, particularly concerning unhealthy food (such as pizza, hot dogs, cheeseburgers) and political hypercorrectness (Braille lettering and handicap parking places) I ascribe to the American style of living rather than to the English one, and thus relying exclusively on my intuition, I took the English set for a mere cultural translation. In order to step beyond my subjective viewpoint, I decided to investigate the way the English and the Americans themselves see and depict each other in their humour, and to compare the results with their respective pictures in German, Czech and Polish languages. The following is a collection of jokes pertaining to the nations' particular features. They include those characteristics of the English and the American cultures that are evident enough to recur in various languages.

The preliminary analysis led to a conclusion that most traits, despite being different for the two countries, may be subsumed under a common denominator – superiority. Therefore, I decided to focus exclusively on the ways in which this exact feature is being displayed. And, as was already mentioned, it is done by quite diverse means. The American sense of dominance is noticed mainly in their boastfulness. They are viewed as prone to show their affluence, possessions and power. The rule apparently dominating the American way of thinking seems to be: the bigger and wealthier, the more admirable. The first example is at the same time an instance of the Czech self-

disparaging humour:

Američan ukažuje Čechovi dům: “Salon, kuchyně, jídelna, samostatné ložnice, dětské pokoje, herna, koupelny, ...”

Čech: “To je toho, to všechno mám taky, ale bez tolika mezistěn!”

[An American presents his house to a Czech: “The living room, the kitchen, the dining room, separate bedrooms, children’s rooms, game room, bathrooms...”

Czech: “This is exactly what I have, only without so many walls in between!”⁵

The German joke on the Turkish minority reflects the same trait, making more explicit reference to money:

In einem Zugabteil sitzen ein Chinese, ein Amerikaner, ein Türke und ein Deutscher.

Plötzlich steht der Chinese auf, öffnet das Fenster und wirft eine Handvoll Reis hinaus. Auf die Frage, was dies soll, entgeget der Chinese: “Wil habben sovill Leis in China, da machen das bissel Leis nix aus.”

Dann wirft der Amerikaner ein Bündel Dollarnoten hinaus und sagt: “Wir aben sou vail Dollar in USA, sou that's Peanuts.”

Da schaut der Türke den Deutschen ängstlich an und sagt: “Du jetz nix kommen auf krasse Idee?!”

[In a train compartment there sit a Chinaman, an American, a Turk, and a German. All of a sudden, the Chinese stands up, opens the window and throws a handful of rice outside. Being asked why he should have done it, he says: “We have so much lice⁶ in China that such an amount of lice makes no difference.”

After a while, the American throws out a pile of dollars and says: “We have so many dollars in the US that these are peanuts.”

Upon this, the Turk shouts out anxiously to the German: “But you don’t yet have so radical views?!”]

The American bragging is also the reason for ridicule in this British example:

Two Yanks are touring London in a taxi. “What is that?” asked one of the Yank's. “Why, that is Buckingham Palace,” answered the taxi driver. “Well, you should

⁵ All translations are mine.

⁶ “Lice” stands for “rice” in the correct English pronunciation; however, the joke adopts the Chinese inability to distinguish [r] and [l] sounds.

see the States, we have much bigger houses over there. And that?” “That is the Post Office Tower.” “Oh, our towers are much bigger.” This went on for much of the day until they went past another building. “Our buildings are much bigger than that one too.” “I thought it might be,” said the taxi driver, “That is the mental institute.”

In this first group of jokes, what emerges is the fact that American way of displaying superiority is not shared by the English. Americans, as discussed by Davies (1990), place stress on self-achievement which should be visible to all the others (and if not visible enough, than audible). This feature stands in direct opposition to what Kate Fox (2005) claims for the British, especially the most affluent part of their society. The English are still quite class-conscious, and climbing the social ladder is not as important a reason for pride as is as being well-born. In fact, any display of money is a feature associated with nouveau-riches and looked down upon, and even talking about money is to a certain extent tabooed (*ibid.*), which is obviously not the case in American society. Therefore, what might be considered surprising, the English uppermost classes share most of their characteristics with the lowest one (the working class) as far as showing off is concerned. This means that they are equally hardly likely to demonstrate their wealth by exposing jewelry, shiny-new furniture, diplomas and other signs of achievement in a direct manner. The same way as the lowest classes, the upper ones do not care about the third parties' opinions on them, especially that more often than not they are simply known to be affluent and/or part of the nobility (which traits do not need to go in hand, with only the second being by itself honourable). It may not be claimed that boastfulness is altogether absent from the English society, but as against the American model, it evokes a directly opposite impression to that of being admired. The above discussion might serve the explanation for why the Czech and German jokes depict American boastfulness with a hint of admiration or envy, while the British one is disdainful.

The English, however, do have their ways of making others aware of their superiority and this is by means of their chief characteristic – the understatement. Kate Fox claims that this feature holds for all instances of social life and provides the following examples: “‘Not bad’ (meaning outstandingly brilliant); ‘A bit of a nuisance’ (meaning disastrous, traumatic, horrible); ‘Not very friendly’ (meaning abominably cruel)” (Fox, 2005: 203-204). The following Polish example perfectly illustrates the feature in question:

Dwóch Anglików w średnim wieku gra w golfa. W pewnej chwili obok pola golfowego przechodzi kondukt żałobny. Jeden z grających odkłada swój kij i

zdejmuje czapkę.

- Cóż to – dziwi się drugi – przerywa pan grę?

- Proszę mi wybaczyć, ale, bądź co bądź, byliśmy małżeństwem 25 lat.

[Two middle-aged Englishmen are playing golf together. At a certain point, they are passed by a cortege. One of the English puts aside his golf stick and takes off his cap.

“Why, sir?” – wonders the other. “You break the game?”

“Please do excuse me, but after all we’ve been married for 25 years”.]

Understatement is not only verbal, however. Even the house rules are based on it, allowing the self-conscious upper classes to expose their trophies in such places as the downstairs bathrooms – a clever way of having most of their guests see them without being outwardly boastful (Fox 2005: 117). “Outwardly” is a defining expression here, since, as claimed by Davies, “(...) English understatement is only a more subtle form of boasting” (Davies 1984; cited in Davies 1990: 250). Understatement may be thus opposed to American overstatement, but both are directed at the same goal – superiority. The English aloofness gets portrayed also by other means. They seem to be better as far as their language, tradition and culture are concerned. With regard to language, British jokes tend to depict the American variety of English as a deteriorated, or in any other way inferior, form of their own. The following are two English jokes concerning the differences in which the two nations use their language:

An American visiting in England asked at the hotel for the elevator. The portiere looked a bit confused but smiled when he realized what the man wanted.”You must mean the lift,” he said. ”No,” the American responded. “If I ask for the elevator I mean the elevator.” “Well,” the portiere answered, “over here we call them lifts”. “Now you listen”, the American said rather irritated, “someone in America invented the elevator.” “Oh, right you are sir,” the portiere said in a polite tone, “but someone here in England invented the language.”

An American: “A lie never passed through the lips of George Washington.”

A British: “No, because he spoke through the nose, like the rest of you.”

What may be quite surprising, the American handling of their language is also the subject of ridicule outside the English-speaking world, as shown in this Czech example:

Když někdo umí dva jazyky, je dualingvální. Když někdo umí tři jazyky, je trilingvální. Kdo je to ten, kdo neumí pořádně ani svůj mateřský jazyk? Američan!

[If someone speaks two languages, we call him bilingual. If someone speaks three languages, we call him trilingual. And what do we call someone who cannot even speak his own language?

An American!]

The English sense of superiority due to their accent is obviously closely connected with their class-consciousness and the mechanism of recognizing others' background by the way they speak. This tendency is largely absent from the American society, which relies on egalitarianism (Davies 1990: 234- 275). Of course, this equality is to a marked extent as hypocritical as the British understatement, but the ideal is that of even opportunities.⁷ Among the English, there exists no such ideal and the RP accent still remains a default and most unmarked variety, being associated with the upper classes and public schools, although it is in fact spoken by a tiny minority of the British society of only about 5% (e.g. Anderson and Trudgill 1990; Trudgill 2002). The aversion towards the American way of speaking is not even disturbed by the historical development of the language, showing the American speech features as earlier developments (that is pre-RP) of the British one. What is more, the research carried by Lars Anderson and Peter Trudgill (1990: 134) shows that both for the British and the Americans the RP accent is considered the most pleasing and this is due to its connotations with "education, wealth, power, status and prestige." Thus, the Czech example is even likely to be originally British and simply translated into the Czech language. In response to such a treatment, the Americans do not tend to ridicule the English dialect, but the class-obsession itself, as in the following American joke:

An Englishman in New York said to a Yankee that America was a great country, but there were some things that the Americans had not got; they had no gentry.

"What are they?" asked the Yankee.

"Well, people who don't do anything, you know," replied the Englishman.

⁷ The American hypocrisy in this respect is spotted easily, as the following German example shows: "Frage an Radio Eriwan: 'Ginge es uns besser, wenn wir Amerikaner wären?' Antwort: 'Weiße oder Schwarze?' [A question in Radio Eriwan: Would we be better off if we were American? Answer: But white of black?]"

“Oh,” said the Yankee, “we have plenty of them in America, but we don’t call them gentry; we call ‘em tramps.”

(George 1903; cited in Davies 1990: 248)

This joke again reveals a discrepancy of features among the two nations: the American praise of work as a dignifying feature and the British conviction that nobility cannot be bought but inherited. The aloofness of the English is also underlying the following Polish self-disparaging joke:

Przed obrazem przedstawiającym Adama i Ewę spotkali się: Niemiec, Francuz, Anglik i Polak. Niemiec mówi:

- Spójrzcie tylko na ich doskonałą budowę, atletyczne ciało Adama i blond włosy Ewy. Oni musieli być Niemcami.

Na to Francuz: - Ależ skąd! Zwróćcie uwagę na erotyzm tej sytuacji, na ich nagie ciała. To na pewno Francuzi.

Na to Anglik: - Panowie, czy widzicie szlachetność ich gestów, ich arystokratyczną postawę. To Anglicy.

Po kilku chwilach milczenia odzywa się Polak:

- Nie mają ubrań, nie mają butów, nie mają dachu nad głową, do jedzenia jedno jabłuszko, nie protestują i wydaje im się, że są w raju. To Polacy...

[A German, a French, an Englishman and a Pole are musing at the picture of Adam and Eve.

- Just look at how perfectly they are built, at Adam’s athletic body and Eve’s blond hair. They must have been German.

The French responds: - What a nonsense! The erotic atmosphere of the situation and their naked bodies... They must have been French!

- Gentlemen - the Englishman says. - Can’t you see the elegance of their gestures and their aristocratic air. They are English.

After a couple of minutes of silence, the Pole says:

- They have no clothes or shoes, they have no shelter, they have only an apple to eat, they do not protest and they consider it a paradise. They are Poles...]

English class-consciousness is closely connected with knowing one’s proper place, as is illustrated in the following Czech joke:

Na širém moři se potápí loď. Z kajuty první třídy vyjde pomalým krokem Angličan s dýmku v ústech a ptá se kapitána: “Prosím vás, kde je záchranný člun pro kuřáky?”

[A ship is sinking in the middle of the sea. A first-class passenger smoking a pipe calmly walks out of his cabin and asks the captain: “Excuse me, which lifeboat is for smokers?”]

As discussed by Fox (2005), being aware of one’s position is one of the dominant features of the English society and any attempts to transgress the rules is strongly frowned upon, the evidence for which is observable even in such mundane situations as queuing. Queue-jumpers are considered serious offenders against the rest of the society. Other everyday activities are also subject to rules for proper and dignified behaviour, and may apply to food, as in this Polish joke:

Mr. Smith płynie przez ocean.

Podpływa do niego rekin.

Mr. Smith wyjmuję nóż.

Na to oburzony rekin:

- Mr. Smith! Pan, Anglik, z nożem do ryby?!

Mr. Smith schował nóż.

Pogrzebu nie będzie.

[Mr. Smith was swimming across the ocean and was suddenly approached by a shark.

He took out a knife, upon which the indignant shark responded:

- Mr. Smith! You, an Englishman, using a knife for a fish?!

So Mr. Smith put his knife aside.

No funeral is planned.]

Or may also involve drink, as in this English joke characterizing a number of ethnic groups:

An insect falls into a mug of beer. English Man: Throws his mug of beer on the floor and walks out. American Man: Takes out the insect and drinks the beer. Chinese Man: Eats the insect and throws the beer. Indian Man: Sells the insect to the Chinese and the beer to the Englishman and buys himself a new mug of beer. Pakistani Man: Accuses the Indian of throwing the insect into his mug, relates the

issue to Kashmir, asks the Chinese for military aid and takes a loan to buy another mug of beer.

Obviously, the beer from the above example merely provides an excuse for unveiling attitudes towards the nationalities mentioned. From the ones that are of interest in the present paper, not only does the joke mention the British ideal of pride and dignity, but also the American ignorance. The negative air of the second group's characteristic may be a hint that the origin of the above joke is not American, but most likely rather British (their characteristic being most admirable), or coming from an independent party. The English, though perhaps portrayed in a substantial number of ways, are in fact nation never seen as having bad manners, which stands in direct opposition to the Americans who are predominantly depicted in humour as rude and lacking culture. Scott (1931; cited in Davies 1990: 245) gives the following example of this feature:

Boston *Globe*: 'We've got fifty Yankettes married into English nobility right now. Some of them are duchesses. Some are countesses. Eleven are baronesses. Only one is a lady.'

Similarly as was the case with the previous joke, in this one it is also the English perspective that appears to emerge, emphasizing the belief that gentry is not a notion people can simply purchase or acquire through marriage, but a complex array of rules conducting their behaviour (beside the obligatorily noble ancestry). To the English, the American conduct may appear as entirely improper: they are uninhibited, unafraid of making complaints, boastful, sociable, enterprising, adventurous, which on the very start makes them completely as un-English, and hence as unlikely candidates for nobility, as possible. The alleged lack of culture among the US citizens is mocked, for example, in the following German joke:

Was sind die fünf dünnsten Bücher auf der ganzen Welt?

Die größten schottischen Auslandsinvestitionen, Italienische Heldensagen, Britische Kochkunst, Amerikanische Kulturgeschichte und österreichische Nobelpreisträger.

[Which five books are the thinnest in the world?

Scottish Biggest Foreign Investments, Italian Heroic Epics, British Cuisine, The History of American Culture, and Austrian Nobel Prize Winners]

The American rudeness and ignorance concerns not only their bad manners or poor heritage, but also their indifference towards the rest of the world. It cannot be denied that the US is a country big enough to stand for the whole continent, nevertheless the lack of knowledge concerning the world outside its borders is quite striking and therefore it is oftentimes adopted for humour purposes. The following is a joke in the English language, obtained from a German website.

A group of people from all over the world were brought to the United Nations office and where asked the following question:

Please give us your opinion about food shortage in the rest of the world!
No one could answer the question because:

- the people from Latin America did not understand the word PLEASE.
- the people from China did not understand the word GIVE.
- the people from the Middle East did not understand the words: YOUR OPINION.
- the people from Africa did not understand the word FOOD.
- the people from EUROPE did not understand the word SHORTAGE.
- the Americans did not understand the words REST OF THE WORLD

As argued by many authors (such as Mikes [1946] 1998; Paxman 1999; Fox 2005) interested in the English, the UK citizens also have their mother country in high regard, perceiving it even as an entity separate entirely independent from the rest of Europe (*e.g.* by such statements as “Britain and the Continent,” or “the English Channel,” *etc.*), which is additionally facilitated by its insular location. The English are viewed as being distanced, but only the Americans are shown as distanced by their disregard for the rest of the world. The following German joke is to a certain extent mockingly tragic:

Krieg ist Gottes Art den Amerikanern Geographie zu lehren ...

[War is the way God teaches the Americans geography...]

The above sentence involves another American ethnic script, that of militarism and aggression. A number of military operations Americans have participated in recent decades have been a matter of dispute as to their formal justification. The same way as the alleged egalitarianism of the American society mentioned above, the all-solving excuse of the struggle for democracy remains a questionable issue, especially concerning the methods by which it is to be introduced. These reasons underlie the definition of the term “democracy” as is coined anew for the US in the

following examples from the Polish language:

W amerykańskiej szkole pani pyta dzieci, na czym polega demokracja. Mały John odpowiada:

- *Demokracja to możliwość wyboru kraju, który chcemy okupować.*

[In an American school, the teacher asks children what the rules of democracy are. Little John answers:

- Democracy is when we have the right to choose a country we want to occupy.]

Departament Stanu zamieścił w gazecie następujące ogłoszenie:

- *Wyzwalamy ludność i ustanawiamy demokrację. Cena wysoka. Kraje bez zasobów proszone są o nie składanie podań.*

[The State Department issued the following press add:

- We free peoples and establish democracies. High costs. Countries with no natural sources are asked not to apply.]

American democracy is also the subject of ridicule in Czech Republic. The following is a mockery of George W. Bush's rhetoric:

Z projevu G. W. Bushe k americkému lidu:

Nepřítel věrolomně napadl naše letouny, když mírumilovně bombardovaly jeho města.

[From George W. Bush's address to the American society:

The enemy deceitfully attacked our airplanes, when they were peacefully bombing his cities.]

What is quite surprising, at the present moment, there exist no jokes concerning the British Empire, although its boundaries used to be stretched around the world. It might be due to the fact that it is mostly a relic of the past. My guess, however, is that it results from the fact that it had been created with a straight-forwardly stated intention – that of gaining wealth and power. The American militarism in this respect is different, it appears to be hidden behind a shield of good will and carrying aid to those who need it. It is this hypocrisy that is mainly ridiculed in humour concerning Americans rather than the very fact that they actually are militarily active. As far as this characteristic is concerned, it appears that in this case England and USA have swapped their general rules of conduct, with the British usually being reserved, indirect and understated, and the Americans open, frank and demanding.

Despite being hypocritical, the American interpretation of their political system, as well as their alleged praise of equality, is obviously connected with the acquisitive drive they follow. The bigger the country, the more possessions it has, the wealthier its nation is (and hence – the more grounds for boasting it has). The last topic once again proves that the dominant feature of both the Americans and the English is their feeling of superiority and their right to lay the rules. It also smoothly hints on the features mentioned at the beginning of the paper, that is, to the American praise of wealth and their boastfulness.

At this point, an outline comparative summary of the English and American traits may be created. For the Americans, superiority is displayed through their boastfulness, for which they are either humorously admired (*e.g.* in German or Czech jokes) or disdained (as in England). Bragging involves the wealth of the US nation, concerning the quantity and size of its possessions. Superiority script for Americans also adopts the form of militarism/aggression, which is generally disapproved of in jokes from the discussed countries for being ungrounded and hypocritical. There is, however, a reason for the American self-praise, as they are a nation directed at achievement appreciation and therefore at hard work and climbing up the social ladder. Thus, they are pictured as an active nation, enterprising and self-reliant, innovative and creative.

The English superiority is based on entirely different grounds. Though there is a certain amount of boasting among the English, it is hidden behind understatement and indirect, contradictory information. Unlike Americans, they do not show their affluence, since those who are wealthy are either part of gentry (and by this very reason looked up to) or social-climbers (and disregarded by those they want to impress). The wealth of tradition and heritage is the reason for English pride, and self-achievement and technological advancement may at the most constitute only secondary traits. The English class-consciousness and rules of conduct connected with it are strongly associated with the people's proper behaviour and culture, the language involved. This last feature stands in opposition to the way Americans are viewed in humour scripts: they are usually self-centered, ignorant and lacking good manners. The American English is seen as a mutilation of the "sacred" British variety.

In sum, my introductory assumption concerning the two "Only in..." anecdotes appears to be founded in both humorous and scientific data. The two nations seem to be different as chalk and cheese, even as far as their language is concerned. Already George Bernard Shaw (cited in Blake 2007: 124) observed that "England and

America are two countries separated by a common tongue.” As has been proved, there are quite a number of differences among the two nations other than language and therefore the “Only in...” examples are rather unlikely. What I hope my paper also illustrates is that there is empirical data underlying the discussed ethnic humour scripts. Furthermore, in contrast to Davies’ claims, I would also argue that they reveal not only facts, but also attitudes and are valid evaluations of the researched ethnic groups. This preliminary study may be further supported by in Blake’s words that “[b]ehind every joke there lurk shared beliefs and attitudes” (Blake 2007: 26). Humour is therefore, the way I see it, on a par with other types of language use.

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