

Humour in English versus “English humour” in the language classroom: case studies from France



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Questions

- What is specific about teaching humour in a language classroom?
- ❖ What did our students learn:
 - ❖ in terms of language skills?
 - ❖ about humour and the study of humour?
 - ❖ about critical thinking (about content, about language)?
- ❖ What did we learn:
 - ❖ about how to explain our research field to students?
 - ❖ about the linguistic and cultural dimension of humour theories/categories?
 - ❖ about our own cultural/theoretical baggage?

Background

❑ Presenters' ongoing collaboration on French/English humour topics:

- ❑ Panel at ISHS2017 on “Translation and terminology of humour”
 - ❑ Humours of the Past (HOP) AHRC project, shared interest in development of “humour”
 - ❑ Réseau Interdisciplinaire pour la Recherche sur l'Humour (RIRH) founded in 2017, dedicated to promoting humour studies research in France.
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- Different teaching backgrounds: Comparative Literature (YMTG) vs. English (WN), but shared interest in the relationship between humour and teaching (cf François-Deneve 2017; Nilsen and Nilsen 2018)
 - Shared reflection on humour as a pedagogical tool vs. humour as a topic area
 - ... and on the tendency of reflexive humour to provoke reader responses and [hopefully] encourage critical thought
 - Chance invitation to teach a course entitled “English humour, humour in English” during autumn semester 2017.

Course details

❑ **Shared teaching in autumn semester 2017: “English Humour, Humour in English”**

- ❑ LANSAD (English language for non-specialists) module at Université Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle.
- ❑ L1 (1st-year undergraduate level), mixed groups from programs including modern literature, cinema and drama studies, cultural mediation, history, communication and languages other than English.
- ❑ CERFL B2 stream: above average level for French undergraduates; focus on practicing English through interactive content-based classes.

❑ **Organisation:**

- ❑ weekly 90-minute sessions (we taught 3 out of 10 groups)
- ❑ 3 assessments (2 written analyses, 1 video on “What makes me laugh, and why?”)
- ❑ General > specific content
- ❑ Aim to analyse/deconstruct categories as well as examples
- ❑ Increasing focus on reflexivity and “second-degree” humour (mainly but not exclusively through linguistic examples)
- ❑ **Pre-existing teaching materials were provided – but we quickly decided to develop our own!**
- ❑ **Common preparation/program, with some variation in approach and examples**

Introduction to humour theory: an (anglophone) humour studies perspective

What is humour?

And why do we keep trying to answer the question?

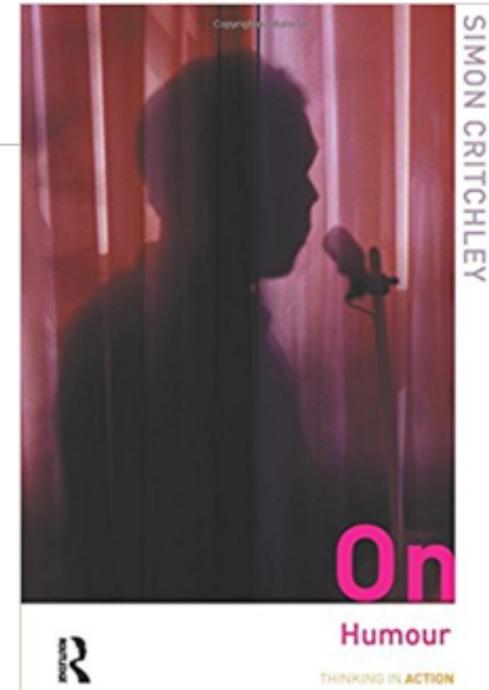
Recap from last week:

- what do YOU think humour is?
- does “humo[u]r” in English mean the same thing as “*humour*” in French?

Theories of humour

There are hundreds, if not thousands of theories of humour, but researchers tend to divide them into three main groups:

- ‘Superiority’ theories:
Hobbes (1651):
‘sudden glory at the infirmities of others, or one’s own self formerly’
- ‘Incongruity’ theories:
Hutcheson (1750): ‘the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea’
- ‘Relief’ theories:
Shaftesbury (1709): ‘And thus the natural free Spirits of ingenious Men, if imprison’d and controll’d, will find out other ways of Motion to relieve themselves in their *Constraint*: and whether it be in Burlesque, Mimickry or Buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be reveng’d on their *Constrainers*.’



...applied to narrower (“French”?) categories

Week	Date	Theme
1	18/09	Introduction
2	25/09	“Humour” and its relatives: a lexical history
3	02/10	Burlesque and its different meanings
4	09/10	Visual comedy and slapstick
5	16/10	Jokes and puns
6	23/10	Test 1 (30%)
7	06/11	Satire and caricature
8	13/11	Grotesque
9	20/11	Parody and pastiche
10	27/11	Reflexive humour
11	04/12	Nonsense
12	11/12	Test 2 (40%), video due (30%)

- An (unconscious?) decision to use one set of analytical categories to reflect on another?
- ❑ Broader vs. narrower and more “literary” categories (cf. Moura 2010, Vaillant 2017)
- ❑ Corresponding to “comic styles” or genres in English (cf. Milner Davis 2014, 2018)?

Example 1: Burlesque



Style (sentiments and diction)

Subject (actions and characters)

Grave and solemn
Characters of superior ranks

Light and ridiculous actions
Characters of inferior ranks

Now Rockwell's flight; which head and laid a greatcoat, and not Joseph, that, quitting remained for pursued a high undoubtedly overrunner; knew the game Plunder, and and measure



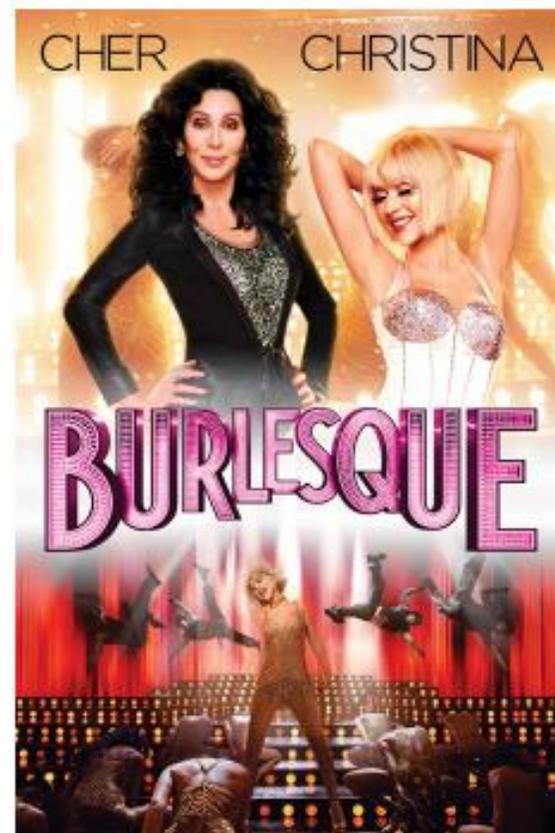
Romeo and Juliet vs E
40 920 371 vues



In a broader sense...

Burlesque (2010)
film poster

(No explicit link with humour)



Example 2: Grotesque

Fi

Originally humour. referred to (Italian). T chimera

In aesthetic expressive adjective excess.

(adapted

Fre

After English meal

Fre way

Eng histo

Georg C

➤ Grotes

➤ Carica

➤ Satire

What

contr

humc

Swift, A Modest Proposal (1729)

- Pamphlet commenting on the conditions of poor people in 18th century Ireland
- Most often classified as a satire on:
 - British attitudes to the population in Ireland
 - Attitudes towards poor people
 - Economic rationalism
- But develops its argument through:
 - Irony: the Proposer seems unaware of the inhumanity of what he is saying
 - Shocking imagery leading to black humour



Example 3: Parody and pastiche



Parody and/or pastiche?

- Both parody and humor contrasts between the original and the parody
- PASTICHE is a copy of a style or manner of writing or painting, often with a humorous or satirical intent
- PARODY is a work that imitates the style or content of a specific writer, artist, or genre with a humorous or satirical intent
- Monty Python and slightly bureaucratic
- Swift's « Modest Proposal » (written in a grotesque style) proposal its harsh and e establishment
- a respect [Simon](#) on the U pronoun and polit caricature
- Original/hypotext: Sid Vicious, [Anarchy in the UK](#)
- Cover/hypertext: Ukulele orchestra of Great Britain, [Anarchy in the Ukulele](#)
- How can we analyse this as parody? Of what?
- How can we analyse this as pastiche? Of what?
- How else could we analyse the humour here?

Observations (1)

Some concepts were easier to introduce than others:

- ❑ Students responded well to the ‘big three’ theories, using them to explain categories and examples (like burlesque, satire, pastiche...) with which they were initially more familiar
- ❑ Students were interested by and receptive to differences in meaning/*faux amis*, e.g. :
humo[u]r <> humour burlesque <> burlesque grotesque <> grotesque
- *This (paradoxically) seemed to encourage them to express themselves in English as a result of having to think in English*

Observations (2)

Some examples worked better than others:

- ❑ Visual and audiovisual examples (Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Donen and Kelly's *Singin' in the Rain*, Monty Python's *Flying Circus* and *Life of Brian*, Stieg's *Shrek*) generated more and usually more interesting responses.
- ❑ Swift's *A Modest Proposal* worked better than other (more recent) written texts
- ❑ Context was more of a problem than expected: caricatures/satires/parodies/pastiches referring to Donald Trump generated more responses than Brexit cartoons and jokes
- ❑ Memes, mashups and other "new media" examples produced fewer responses than expected

Observations (3)

- ❑ Students were interested in (and reasonably skilled at) applying the categories discussed in class to their own language production, even when unable to perform a more standard language analysis:
 - ❑ language errors identified with “incongruity”, humorous or otherwise
 - ❑ marked interest in L2 puns and in playing on pronunciation versus meaning (humour vs humour)
- ❑ Framing (discussed briefly in reference to humour topics) helped language production:
 - ❑ video assignment (“Today I’m going to be a parody of a YouTuber”) vs. traditional classroom interactions
 - ❑ humour/framing as a way to break out of hangups about expression in the language classroom
 - ❑ fascination with reflexive/second-degree/”meta” aspects of humour seemed to encourage critical thought

Conclusions

- ❑ More analysis needed for more convincing results!
- ❑ Compared to other teaching experiences :
 - ❑ the class was broadly successful in encouraging students to think about humour categories. Other attempts to do so have been both discouraging (English literature course on the history of the novel: WN) and more encouraging (advanced BA/MA courses on pastiche, parody and 18th century literature: YMTG)
 - ❑ the use of humour as a tool to think about language matches previous experiences (graphophonemics and nonsense poetry, phonetics and synchronous dubbing: WN), though role of subject matter needs more attention.
 - ❑ humour works as an effective methodological tool for studying literary texts, in order to highlight the complex relationship between a textual fact, its effects, its interpretation and its conditioning of reader responses.
- ❖ Teaching with/about humour is a valuable aid to thinking about the field
- ❖ ... and doing so in a language classroom is particularly helpful for thinking about cross-cultural applications and categories.

Appendix I: from smileys to dubbing detection (2nd year undergraduate, intro to AV translation - WN)

Teenage Dirtbag – Brendan Brown/Wheatus

EN: Her name is Noelle

IPA: /hə 'neɪm ɪz nə'wel/

SYMBOLS: ☹️ ☺️

FR: Your turn to try!

I have a dream about her

/ˈaɪ 'hæv ə 'dri:m ə'baʊt ə/

☺️ ☺️ ☹️ ☹️ ☺️

She rings my bell

/'ʃi: 'rɪŋz maɪ 'bel/

☹️ ☹️ ☺️ ☹️

Add symbols below syllables:

☹️ for bilabials (pbm)

☺️ for w-sounds

☺️ for open a-sounds

(/aɪ/ in 'iron', /æ/ in 'have', /aʊ/ in 'about',
/ɑ:/ in 'class' BUT NOT /eɪ/ in 'maiden')

☺️ for tense /i:/ as in dream

☺️ for rounded o-sounds (/ɔ/ in 'rock',
/oʊ/ in 'behold', /ɔɪ/ in 'boyfriend')

Then work on a dub-able French version!

Appendix II –
introducing literary
parody through
product packaging
(YMTG)

Text on bottom of carton:

“Naughty boy – who said you
could look up my skirt?”

