

Ключникова С.Д., Лашманов Д.И.

Руководитель: Е.В. Молодкина

*Муромский институт (филиал) федерального государственного образовательного учреждения высшего образования «Владимирский государственный университет имени Александра Григорьевича и Николая Григорьевича Столетовых»
602264, г. Муром, Владимирская обл., ул. Орловская, 23
Email: klyuchnikova.sofiya@mail.ru, sonoreonaiden@gmail.com*

Comparison of British and Russian humor

Humour is a very complicated phenomenon which embraces many aspects of people's life. Humour provides an effective means of communicating a wide range of ideas, feelings and opinions [1]. Humour is therapeutic: it serves as a mechanism for struggling against daily stressors [2] and has positive effects on the immune and central nervous [3] systems. In fact, it is so highly valued that very few people can admit their having a lack of a sense of humour [4, 5].

Humour is a very important part of the English national character and an extremely essential element of the national identity. The British are proud of their sense of humour and consider it their national wealth. They treat it very tenderly and it's painful for them when foreigners express their doubt about the English sense of humour. You may question any other British trait traditionally attributed to their nature: courtesy, ingenuity, tolerance, but nothing will hurt their national pride so much as a statement about their lack of humor.

Among all the various types of humour, British people especially cherish irony and sarcasm. It is a classic joke for Brits to tell how pleasant the weather is when it is visibly terrible. You will definitely hear sarcasm if you ask a Brit a stupid question. This dry humour may seem hostile to outsiders, but it is nothing, but a part of the national culture.

Another remarkable thing in the British humour is puns. Pun (or play on words) as a turn of phrase is part of many English jokes. A pun consists in a collision or, on the contrary, in an unexpected combination of two incompatible meanings in one phonetic (graphic) form, therefore, unlike the translation of a regular text, in which its content (including images, connotations, background, author's style) must be poured into a new language form, when translating a pun, the very form of the original - phonetic or graphic - is subject to reexpression.

Consider some types of lexical pun.

1) Playing on the roots or parts of words.

Greenland is ice but Iceland is green - (досл.) «Гренландия - ледяная, а Исландия – зеленая». In this example, there is a permutation of simple words and stems of compound words. This type of language game in jokes is characteristic of the English language tradition and is due to the fact that the English language is characterized by the homonym of the stem and the word and the prevalence of the syntactic type of word formation, in which a compound word does not differ in form from a free phrase. The Russian language is dominated by morphological composition, in which a compound word differs in form from a phrase, which is associated with the synthetic structure of the Russian language and the analytical structure of English.

2) A pun based on polysemy.

For example, Mike: I hear that you went fishing last week. Did you get anything? - 'Слышал, ты вчера был на рыбалке. Получилось что-то?'

Sid: Yep. Sunburned and mosquito bites - 'Ага. Солнечные ожоги и укусы комаров'.

3) Word play with homonyms (words with the same spelling, pronunciation, but different meanings), homographs (words with different pronunciations, but with the same spelling), homophones (words with different spellings, but with the same pronunciation).

Why did the bald man paint rabbits on his head? Because from the distance they looked like hares - 'Почему лысый мужчина нарисовал на голове зайцев? Потому что издалека они похожи на волосы'. At first, it may seem that there is no humour in this joke. However, the word «hares» is similar in sound to hairs, which means «hair», i.e. the wordplay in this joke is based on the consonance of homophones. A bald man «draws hares» on his head, because from a distance they look like hair.

4) The ambiguity of grammatical constructions.

- May I try on that red dress in the window?
- No, madam, you'll have to use the fitting-room like everyone else.

In this anecdote, 'window' refers to a dress: 'can I try on a red dress in the window? But the shop assistant takes this to mean 'try it on in the window', so she replies that they have fitting [6; 7].

Russian humor.

Russian humor can be difficult to understand even if you speak fluent Russian. This is often because many Russian jokes play on cultural stereotypes, political events, popular culture, and Soviet-time movies. Even though most of the jokes are related to everyday things, Russians are proud of the daring social content of their humor and also diverse range of knowledge which their jokes contain.

A most common form of Russian humor that you will hear is a short fictional story or dialogue with a punch line. In Russian it is called an anecdote. However, anecdotes are not just jokes because their purpose is not only to make somebody laugh, but also to reveal a more general truth.

Russian humour is expressed in black humour jokes, anecdotes, puns and ditties.

Here are a few examples most popular groups of anecdotes.

1. A social anecdote.

The object of the social anecdote is a particular social group that is discriminated on the basis of gender or profession. The jokes in this group are satirical in nature, with an element of irony and sarcasm. The social stereotypes focus on certain characteristics: the stupidity and talkativeness of women, the boastfulness of men, the greediness and richness of doctors and lawyers, the stupidity and stubbornness of police officers, etc.

-Didn't Rose break up with you? You were inseparable for a year.

-Yeah, imagine that.

-Did you tell her about your rich uncle who has you as his only heir?

-That's why I told her. She left me to become my Auntie.

2. A political anecdote.

Political anecdotes are characterised by an ambivalent position in attitude to the current ideology in a particular society.

Considering the situation of corruption in the country, the question of where spring has gone does not even arise.

3. A religious anecdote.

The content of religious anecdotes is complicated by the inclusion of a part of the virtual world.

Suppose God is a woman. Then not only would I go to hell, but I would never know why.

Apart from jokes, Russian humour is very sarcastic and it is expressed in word play. Sometimes there are short poems including nonsense and black humour verses, similar to the Little Willie rhymes by Harry Graham, or, less so, Edward Lear's literary "nonsense verse".[11]

Often they have recurring characters such as "little boy", "Vova", "a girl", "Masha". Most rhymes involve death or a painful experience either for the protagonists or other people. This type of joke is especially popular with children. [11]

To conclude, the distribution of humorous texts by the English and Russians is different: the English prefer to joke depending on how the dialogue breaks out, while for the Russians they prefer to tell continuously the entire available stock of jokes (trawling jokes\травить анекдоты). It can be said that for many speakers of Russian culture, tuning in to a funny tone in a serious situation of communication, deliberately turning the conditions of communication upside down, is the norm.

It takes a while for a person who moved to another country to get used to the national sense of humor and start to genuinely laugh at it, but it is still possible. British and Russian humours are quite alike, even if it doesn't seem so at first. They share traits like dryness and irony. This opens a prospect for international communication we probably have never thought of before.

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