

English for Satirical Purposes:

Humour, Culture and Language Learning at the Faculty of Political Science [1]

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Abstract

In the light of the current concerns about ESP methodological issues (Candlin, Gotti 2004), this paper presents a culture-focused approach to English language teaching adopted at the Faculty of Political Science in the University of Naples Federico II. A series of humorous texts (jokes, parodies, songs and sketches) were selected as language materials and prompted groupwork discussion according to a semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis framework. The written assignment also enabled the students to express their viewpoints on socio-political matters and at the same time improve their language skills.

ESP at the Faculty of Political Science

One of the major difficulties faced by language teachers at a Political Science Faculty is represented by the apparent lack of a specific professional focus with language materials largely including media messages such as advertisements, news articles, TV programmes and political speeches, all of them packaged for mass consumption. While in scientific faculties the focus on discipline-based technical knowledge as the main vehicle of language practice may be highly motivating for the students, in a Faculty of political and social sciences the attention paid to society and politics through English language materials – common rather than specific concerns – may surprisingly fail to arouse the students' enthusiasm. As an alternative, academic writing and presentation techniques may prove more stimulating and represent the missing disciplinary specificity (Bandini 2007; Zorko 2007), although most undergraduates may feel that, in place or alongside genres far removed from their actual experience, they could benefit more from authentic content integrated into language materials drawing on the Faculty subjects (Donadio 2002).

This paper presents the results of an ESP course on English humour and satire carried out at the

Faculty of Political Science in Naples University Federico II in 2005 and 2006. Humour was selected as the “leading thread” both for the challenge it poses to world order and commonsense views, and for its culture-bound character as a key to national customs and ways of being. By shifting the focus from society as it is to society as ridiculed and criticized by insiders, my objective was twofold: to encourage the students to express their viewpoints and possibly question the status quo, and to develop awareness of cross-cultural differences. If political science English represents contemporary society through news, adverts, speeches, documentaries etc., English for satirical purposes tends to question it by encouraging critical stance.

As documented in the literature, the special purposes of professional language varieties appear to cover two distinct domains, science and culture, i.e. exact sciences vs. moral sciences (Gotti 2003: 46-49; see Maglie 2005 and Sully 2006 for an extensive overview of ESP studies). This macrodivision has some disciplinary and linguistic consequences also touching on language teaching. On the one hand, as the concepts of scientific and technical disciplines such as mathematics and physics appear to be objective and equivalent across nations, so the language used to express those concepts is clear and unequivocal; on the other, the cultural and socio-political constructions characterising the social sciences seem to be largely based on arbitrary conventions and consequently also the language used to denote them appears ambiguous and culturally biased (see Candlin and Gotti 2004 for an extensive overview of cultural factors in domain-specific English). For example, while *prime number* and *quantum* indicate unambiguous concepts, *socialism* and *state* appear controversial, associated with a plurality of meanings; similarly, as lexical items, they are connotative rather denotative, and they need to be *interpreted* within the relevant socio-political or ideological frameworks rather than *understood* within the disciplinary context of reference.

The surprise element: Humour

Humour offers invaluable insight into the complex inner workings of a given culture and society since the perception of and the reaction to the comic differentiates communities and groups as well as constituting a significant aspect of national folklore (Billig 2005: 185-186; Chiaro 1992: 80-81; Davies 1998). Although some of the topics which are exploited in humorous discourses seem to have a universal cross-cultural resonance (e.g. mishaps; sexual encounters; idiocies) – all the more so as today’s globalised world brings persons and peoples closer together –, the way they are covered and explored is heavily dependent on the cultural make up of the country. For instance, why do the English appreciate surreal elephant jokes while the Italians enjoy the slow wit of Pierino? Or why do the British ridicule the Irish while the Americans the Poles? Why are lawyers the target of American jokes and policemen (*carabinieri*) the target of Italian humour? How does Italian-style comedy compare with English slapstick comedies and are there other forms of humour specific to national or regional cultures?

Whenever we concern ourselves with cultural aspects, we are on shaky ground, as the very concept of culture encompasses all and anything and lends itself to generalizations never (as such) entirely faithful to the pluralist and often contradictory nature of “the spirit of a nation”. However, by looking into the various forms of humour manifest in a society, we can become more aware of some typical aspects and interpret them either as culture-bound traits, a reflection of social trends or else as the expression of individual creativity. For example, we can decide to interpret Mr. Bean as an icon of Britishness, i.e. a national character based on unconventionality and eccentricity, as the universal outcome of alienating social relationships, as the brilliant creation of Mr. Rowan Atkinson, or as a mix of all three.

Humour is contagious: the systematic exposure to comic and satirical genres helps us first to develop alternative viewpoints and finally prompts us to produce our own modest attempts at humour and self-irony: making light of classroom misadventures due to faulty technological equipment or trying to subvert traditional order by implementing *footlogical* thinking (as

suggested by the poem below which I wrote in one of those topsy-turvy moments) is only the beginning of a new jolly-jokey English language class, in which the teacher and the students feel free to contribute cartoons, jokes and light poems to the lessons (also see Woolard 1996):

Glory be cast upon you, o humble feet,

Walking and running and sometimes taking a seat;

Carrying the burden of the human weight

Without so much as moaning or uttering a complaint. (...)

You bear with noble dignity your state of neglect

- Oh cruellest fate! Oh destiny abject ! -

That you that come the first should be considered last:

Posterity transmit your worthiness to last.

The course procedure: from reading to writing

During the English language course, students are explained the basics of rhetoric and semiotics so as to enable them to use these tools in the analysis of verbal and multimodal texts (Chandler 2002; Fairclough 1995). Exposure to a variety of humorous texts (jokes, songs, parodies and sketches), which they are asked to comment on, contributes to sensitize them to the ideological meanings attached to any stretch of language, especially the ones related to political and social issues [2]. The students, eager to share their views on such sensitive topics, carefully formulate their thoughts in English, much simplifying conceptual complexity for the sake of clarity; in so doing, they stretch the scope of their language abilities from familiar topics and activities to ideas and opinions for social and professional purposes, that is from Level B1 of the European Language Portfolio to Level C1 (Council of Europe 2001). Theory and practice intertwine in the discussion sessions which conclude groupwork and the very openendedness of the discussion, in which various viewpoints may come to the fore, is meant to highlight the interpretative and non-dogmatic quality of political and social analyses.

The close examination of humorous texts is meant to lay bare some of their rhetorical strategies together with the underlying assumptions of the intended readership (see Sanniti di Baja 2004) but, even more importantly, it works as an “appetizer”, stimulating students to the production of their own humorous prose. Throughout the course I encourage the students to produce some piece of writing inspired by the text we are currently exploring. For example, Hugo Rifkind’s parodic column “My week” in *The Sunday Times* has inspired some other politicians’ fake diaries, e.g. George W. Bush, Fidel Castro, Romano Prodi. In particular, the critical reading of the pseudo- Berlusconi diary in *The Time*, April 15 2006, highlighted hyperbole and irony as the main rhetorical devices used by the journalist to make fun of Mr. Berlusconi, together with the mixture of conversational exchanges and first person account as the narrative technique spicing up the text:

I am at my villa in Sardinia, floating on a Lilo in the middle of my Italy-shaped pool. Also, I am on the telephone. “You old son of a bitch on heat!” I say, pleasantly. “Ha! Romano! I hope you don’t mind that I give you this call?” [...]

The line goes dead. Intolerable. I must buy another telecoms company.

In line with the caricature portrayal of Mr. Berlusconi, the technique of *accumulatio*, i.e. the

concentration of hyperbolic icons of power often loaded with a sexual undertone (e.g. success with women and bawdiness side by side with the ostentation of money and wealth), was also used by the students to characterise other equally infamous politicians and inspired their own amateurish attempts at political satire.

Creative writing is particularly demanding, especially if the writer wants to achieve a comic effect, which is very often based on rather sophisticated lexical choices. For example, one of the reasons why the Berlusconi diary proved so amusing was the bawdy language he was shown to indulge in all circumstances: yet, the typical taboo words were replaced by pompous and unusual phrases or medical terms such as “foul lactating haemorrhoid”; “grotesque old sow”; “equipment like a prune”; “testicle”.

Wordplay such as “Bleah Blair” od “Daddy Berlie” (pointing to Mr. Berlusconi’s paternalistic or domineering character) alongside the caricature of the politicians’ idiolects require a good control of lexical resources and awareness of stylistic choices, which not necessarily correspond to the language skills possessed by undergraduate students at the Faculty of Political Science. On the other hand, it is the very attempt at humorous writing in English that stretches the language resources of the students or at least makes them aware of the challenge posed by humour and satire.

Another fun activity was to invent new *-ism* words as John Lennon did in his song “Give Peace a Chance”, which was analysed and interpreted as a pacifist hymn on the surface level, and an act of political denigration masqueraded as childish wordplay on the deep level:

Ev'rybody's talking about
Bagism, Shagism, Dragism, Madism, Ragism, Tagism
This-ism, that-ism, is-m, is-m, is-m.

All we are saying is give peace a chance

Apart from a few words such as *teacherism* and *studentism*, inescapable given the context (and which, to our surprise, we discovered were already circulating on the Internet), we came up with more intriguing words such as *bumpism*, *dollism*, *flowerism* and *dontknowism*, this last applying to the semantics of the coinages above and of others not included.

The act of writing in itself, regardless of grammar mistakes and odd expressions, is to be considered an achievement on the part of the students as they manage to set themselves free from the highly structured language exercises which they are asked to carry out in their standard language practice and to voice their own opinions on crucial or trivial matters (Hyland 2003: 56-57). Whatever the topic of their paper, it sharpens their critical-thinking skills (Harris Leonhard 2002: 32) and also shows some ambitious attempts at argumentation and critique, all the more praiseworthy as no proper writing tuition is provided apart from feedback on the form and content of each assignment.

The cultural aspects

The student’s writings were produced both during and after the course as an additional form of assessment of their language skills and of their analytical capacities. Up to December 2006, they consist of 82 compositions, which roughly correspond to the number of attending students. Very few of them are creative elaborations of socio-political topics and individual attempts at humour and satire probably because of the students’ incomplete control of the language resources activating the poetic function.

The large majority of the texts produced are, in fact, argumentative, commenting on various

aspects of humour and examining the socio-political implications of satire. The two leading thematic categories are politics and culture, but other comments also focus on gender relationships and wordplay. One interesting aspect investigated in the comments is the cross-cultural comparison between British and Italian forms of humour. The students' comments have often pointed to irony and composure as the main elements of British humour versus the more emotional and "explicit" nature of Italian funniness.

When teaching/learning a foreign language and culture, in the very act of putting ourselves in somebody else's shoes, we may easily and unknowingly adopt and reinforce the current stereotypes or even misinterpret the character of a national culture on the basis of incomplete data (Davies 1998: 173). So, any cultural analysis of humour has to be taken very cautiously, all the more so when, as in this case, it claims no scientific value: the students' comments, originating in the clash between Italian jokes well-known to them and more elusive English sketches, simply aim to give personal views on a vast open-to-all domain such as humour and exercise their thinking and writing skills. As one student sketches out, "For the first time this year I've heard about the English sense of humour...it is very funny for an Italian to learn something more about English culture".

Concluding remarks

Learning English language through humorous and satirical texts has sensitized the students to cultural differences and developed their critical judgement. In addition, the writing assignment has stretched their language resources, encouraged original thinking and voiced their own viewpoints. Apart from very few cheats, the students have carried out their task zealously, exploring some interrelated aspects of English language and culture(s), with interesting and sometimes surprising results. In fact, the students' papers have provided fresh ideas for subsequent lessons and have represented a convenient and pleasurable backchannel for a truly two-way educational and communicative process.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at *TESOL 31st National Convention* held in the University of Naples Federico II on November 3-4 2006.

[2] The texts analysed included recent and not so recent materials: in addition to a selection of political jokes and satirical strips mostly downloaded from the Internet, parodies of G.W. Bush, Monty Python's classic sketches, excerpts from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

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