

ETHNIC JOKES IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This article is dedicated to the role of ethnic humour in professional communication, with examples of both funny and harmless jokes and idioms, which can be used as ice breakers or conversation fillers, and, on the contrary, malicious and offensive jokes and idioms, which can ruin communication in the workplace or lead to conflicts. The analysis of various types of humour and the impact they may have on a certain audience, together with the case studies of British and American ethnic jokes, show that there is a thin line between amusement and offense, and precaution is always necessary when using laughter as a communication tool.

Keywords: jokes; stereotypes; communication; multicultural professional environment.

1. Introduction

According to its definition, communication is “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour” (Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/definition/english/communication>). The keyword in this definition is “common”, which shows that, to function, communication should rely on mutual understanding, on shared values, opinions and beliefs, on common goals. Humour, as an essential factor in communication, should, therefore, rely on these shared principles, should be understood in the same way by all the participants, without offending any of them. In this respect, the study of communication theories could be helpful, as it shows how we should deal with messages, connotations, target audiences or registers, with individuals, groups or organizations, with a view to improving the way we communicate in the workplace and to using humour as an aid to communication, not as a weapon.

Professional communication, as a particular type of communication in work-related contexts, often deals with multinational environments or unfamiliar target audiences that require an efficient, straightforward delivery of the message. In such situations, it is necessary to know communication theories and practical examples based on case studies that could enable the communicator to reach all their goals as far as message and connotations are concerned.

The fields that mostly use professional communication are science, technology, law and business, and the main instances of communication in these domains are both written (e.g. professional emails, memos, CVs, letters, reports, etc.) and oral (e.g. discourses at conferences or symposia, lectures, interviews, etc.)

Although at first sight communication seems related to linguistic interaction, there is more to it than that. 60% of all human communication is represented by body language, which, just like language itself, carries an affective dimension. Both language and gestures express positive or negative feelings towards certain nations or categories of people (racial, ethnic, sexual or religious stereotypes). In order to eliminate these prejudices, which have negative effects on communication, especially if they emerge in

professional contexts, we should learn more about other cultures, since the better the knowledge, the fewer the stereotypes (Rozenfeld 2013). Furthermore, we should understand what mechanisms are involved in forming ethnic prejudices and how we should combat them.

In professional contexts, tough competition, stressful activities, tight deadlines, long hours and the general pressure put on the employees often lead to a decrease in productivity, which the managers try to combat by resorting to teambuilding sessions, where humour is seen as a group binder, tension reliever and booster of creativity, as an important instrument for promoting a certain organizational culture, leadership principles and business strategy.

To reach their main target, of creating a productive environment in the workplace, especially if there are many employees of different nationalities, with different traditions and work ethics, managers usually resort to mild aggressive humour (e.g. a bit of teasing, mocking, ridicule or self-irony), which may lead to a feeling of belonging to an organizational group, like a fraternity, in which, despite their various origins, members feel united by common goals and practices (Martineau 1972, 102). Sometimes, only by seeing that some of their co-workers are teased or ridiculed by the boss, employees start to behave in accordance with group norms (Janes & Olsen 2000, 476).

The first section of this article is dedicated to the analysis of ethnic humour from this double point of view: as an aid to building communication bridges within a team or, on the contrary, as a major cause of ruining a pleasant atmosphere in the workplace. The second section focuses on the anthropological dimension of ethnic jokes, which can reveal certain behavioural patterns specific for various nations and, thus, can facilitate understanding their idiosyncrasies and acting accordingly. The last two parts of the article are more applicative, presenting two case studies: the former refers to the main “targets” of the ethnic jokes told in professional contexts – and not only – in Great Britain, whereas the latter brings to light a recent scandal, in which the officers of a police department in the United States were passing racist jokes via emails.

2. Ethnic humour – a double-edged sword in professional communication

In Lenka Gogova’s view, humour is a double-edged sword, which can either serve as an instrument for “improving interpersonal relationships within a group and supporting the positive psychological wellbeing of the individual or [...] as a tolerated means of criticizing societies and expressing hostility against members of other social groups with different cultural identities” (Gogova 2016, 20).

Supporting her claim, Romero and Cruthirds stress the idea that ethnic humour may lead to interpersonal conflicts in the workplace and should be avoided, since it may even cause legal disputes. Racist, sexist and ethnic jokes usually have significant negative consequences and may alienate people, which is not at all desirable in a multinational organization. If wrongly or maliciously used, humour can inflict pain in certain members of a targeted culture, since it directly or indirectly criticizes their look, mentality, customs, religion or, briefly, their identity (Romero and Cruthirds 2006, 60).

Unlike Romero and Cruthirds, who point to the negative side of ethnic humour, Esholdt praises the positive effects of ethnic jokes in a multicultural environment. Wisely used, these jokes can smash stereotypes and increase people’s trust in each other, especially when self-irony brings to light each nation’s negative features, which should be accepted as they are and not harshly criticized (Esholdt 2015). Therefore, they should

be considered a means to gain more in-depth knowledge about other cultures and to reduce the risk of work-related conflicts.

When we refer to ethnicity, we have in mind several criteria, such as: appearance, history, language, religion and culture. All these can be related to the metaphor of the shopping cart, as Nagel suggests (Nagel 1994, 153). There are certain constants, such as the appearance, history, language or religion of a nation, similar to the size and configuration of the cart, which cannot be changed. Nevertheless, there are some variables, just like the content of the shopping trolley, and here we can include music, art, costumes, beliefs and traditions, which may change over time. Ethnic jokes that refer to the immutable fundamentals of a nation are perceived as more malicious than those related to the changeable aspects of its identity. For example, jokes about religion and appearance are highly offensive, especially if they contain references to death or mutilation, and, consequently, very risky to be told in a multicultural professional context, as proven by the ones presented below:

(1) Q: "What's black and white and red all over?"

A: "A crushed Catholic priest!"

(2) Q: "What's that black stuff between an elephant's toes?"

A: "A slow Indian." (Gini 2015, 54)

The concept of "ethnic humour" is inappropriate, because it implicitly contains the idea that an entire nation has the same characteristics, that the common cultural traditions make it look like an entity, not as a group of individuals, each with their own particularities. This concept becomes more awkward when it is used in intercultural communication, as it implies the existence of two main groups: the well-accepted majority and the ill-seen minority, or "we" against "you". The majority is regarded as superior and, consequently, in a power position towards the minorities, which, despite their different origins, ancestors, language, race or customs, are treated as a unitary group and generally considered "the others".

In ethnic jokes, "the others" are always inferior to the majority and embody all the negative features of the society in which they live, such as laziness, corruption, meanness and, above all, stupidity. Each ethnic group that makes the object of a class of ethnic jokes is portrayed as rude, dirty, ignorant, uneducated, as opposed to the dominant majority group, which is well-mannered, clean, intelligent and educated.

In most of these jokes, the minorities are unable to adapt to the culture of the majority, to the progresses it has made in education, economics, technology, social structures, etc. Other important characteristics that are criticized in ethnic jokes are language and religion, which are essential aspects in defining group identity. Usually, "the others" speak a strange language and are unable to properly learn the language spoken by the majority, and their religious practices, very different from those of the majority, are awkward or even malicious.

The ethnic groups living on the border of two linguistic territories or the immigrants who try to speak the language of the country where they have come have a hard time, as, instead of being encouraged to learn the foreign language, they are constantly criticized and made fun of, which may lead to fear and anxiety. In turn, these feelings may have a negative impact on someone's education, professional activity and networking abilities. If they affect children or teenagers, they are even more harmful, since they may lead to bullying or discrimination, which may cause dropping out from

school and refusal to integrate in the society. Even if it seems funny, the following joke is highly offensive, as it implies making fun of a Mexican child in an American school:

(1) A class of 5th grade students was sitting studying English in class.

The teacher asked, "Can anyone use the words green, pink and yellow in a sentence?"

An African American child says, "Green, pink and yellow are seen in the rainbow."

An Irish child states, "My favourite colours are green, pink and yellow."

A Mexican child says, "When the phone greens, I pink it up and say yellow." (Gogova 2016, 21).

Despite their controversial character, of communication aids and blockers at the same time, ethnic jokes have a huge anthropological potential, as they reveal the specificities of a certain nation and explain the mechanisms through which prejudices and stereotypes are created. The following section of this article analyses these jokes from the anthropological viewpoint and provides examples of appropriate and inappropriate use in professional communication.

3. Ethnic jokes as short anthropological studies

Some ethnic jokes are seen as short anthropological studies, since they refer to certain idiosyncrasies of a nation, to ancient traditions or behavioural traits that surfaced mostly in these instances of humour. More often than not, they are pejorative or derogatory towards the nationalities in question, so they have to be used with caution in professional contexts. As the jokes below prove, some identity elements of a certain culture are attacked, and this can be perceived with amusement or with anger, depending on the connection between the members of the target audience:

(1) Q: How were the Irish dances invented?

A: Too much Guinness and not enough bathrooms!

(2) Q: What do you call it when an Italian has one arm shorter than the other?

A: A speech impediment! (Gini, op. cit. 58)

(3) Ole was dying. On his deathbed, he looked up and said, "Is my wife here?" Lena replied, "Yes, Ole, I'm here, next to you." So, Ole asks, "Are my children here?" "Yes, Daddy, we're all here," says the children. "Are my other relatives also here?" and they say, "Yes, we are all here," Ole says, "Then why is the light on in the kitchen?" (Ole and Lena are famous characters in Scandinavian jokes). (Ibid., 59)

Despite the jokes before, which aim at the peculiarities of specific cultures, there are ethnic jokes that have a more universal character and can simply contain some gaps, which can be filled with the name of a certain nationality. A joke about mothers could pertain to various cultures in which mothers play a key role in family and society, such as Italy, Greece or Israel:

(1) Q: What's the difference between a(n) Italian/ Greek/ Jewish mother and a pit-bull?

A: Sooner or later the pit-bull lets you go! (Ibid., 62)

Similar to the jokes about mothers, there are rather blasphemous jokes about Jesus Christ and the reference to His potential nationality, based on the idiosyncrasies of His

personality. Such jokes could be told in any Christian country, but, depending on the audience's religiosity or on their knowledge about Jesus Christ's life and mission, they could be perceived as anything from simply amusing to highly offending:

Proof positive that Jesus was Italian/ Greek/ American: He lived at home until he was 30. The night before he died, he went out drinking with his buddies. His mother thought he was God. He thought his mother was a virgin. (Ibid.)

A form of integrative humour, which could build bridges in any multicultural environment, is self-referential humour or self-irony. The speaker laughs first of themselves and then of the others, including their own mistakes in their nation's propensity for certain wrongdoings. Many ethnic groups in multinational states have created a set of jokes, anecdotes and stories in which they make fun of themselves, of their customs or traditions. They accept the fact they are a minority in another country and respond to the majority's tendency to stereotyping by pointing to their own faults. This strategy allows them both to preserve their past while living in the present and to feel bicultural. It helps them to overcome the feeling of estrangement and to gain the status of both insiders and outsiders. This form of self-referential humour leads to an easier assimilation and integration in a professional environment, as the speakers admit they are the outsiders, make fun of themselves and, thus, manage to combat the majority's prejudices against them, to reduce the tension caused by power and status differences and to put the speaker and the receivers of the joke on an equal level.

A good example of self-deprecating humour is the one involving the Jews. As Sam Hoffman shows in his book entitled *Old Jews Telling Jokes*, there are a lot of self-referential jokes and anecdotes that Jews like to tell their friends or co-workers of other nationalities, in order to contradict the Anti-Semitic prejudices related to their stinginess, arrogance of being the chosen people, or very close attachment to their over-possessive mothers. The joke below, told by a Jew who imitates the accent of old Jewish women living in the United States and speaking English, is suitable for the professional context, as it makes fun of various problems of contemporary society, pertaining not only to Jews, but also to hard-working people from any modern society: the lack of time to spend with their family, the attempt to compensate for the absence with expensive gifts or the visits to the psychiatrist to figure out the relationship with one's mother.

Three older Jewish women, sitting on a bench in Miami. The first one boasts, "I have such a wonnerful son. You know what he did for mine seventy-fifth birthday? Chartered an airplane. Got all my friends, flew them down here for a party... in the grand ballroom! They made a chopped liver look like a svan! You could die from it! Seven-piece orchestra, we partied till two in the morning. What a nize boy."

The second lady says, "Well, you have a nize son, but let me tell you about my boy. Took me around the world onna cruise...Princess Line, two wholes weeks... Ve Played shuffleboard on the deck... We sat at the captain's table. Parties every night. Such a great kid."

The third lady: "Vell, you have a nize boy and you have a nize boy, but let me tell you about my zon Marvin. He live in New York City. He zees a psee-kye-a-trist [psychiatrist] tree times a veek...two hun'dred dollars an hour...and all he talks about is me!" (Ibid., 59-60)

Besides utterly funny jokes, like the previous one, the jokes about Jews can be bitter-sweet, as they may refer to the hardships through which the Jews have passed. This self-irony in front of death, imprisonment and poverty can be considered a desperate attempt to deny – and to defy – the horrors that the Jews have experienced. This attitude of laughing in front of adversity and absurdity can be summed up, in a paraphrase of the famous Cartesian dictum, as "I laugh, therefore I am!" (Herzog 2012, 6). The examples

below show how this mentality can make the absurdity of the unjust treatment more bearable:

- (1) A Jewish prisoner bumps into a German guard. The guard shouts at him, "Schwein" (pig)! The Prisoner bows and says, "Cohen. Pleased to meet you."
- (2) A poor Jew living in post-war Poland wanted to commit suicide and tried hanging himself. But the quality of the rope in the noose is so bad it breaks. So, he tried sticking his head in the oven, but they shut off the gas between two and five in the afternoon. Then he tried living on his rations. That worked like a charm! (Ibid., 61)

Unlike the so-called "universal" jokes, in which the nationality of the protagonists can be changed according to the case, there are very specific jokes and idioms, which are used by the Britons to make fun of certain nationalities they do not particularly like, due to previous conflicts. As shown in the following section, the targets of British ethnic jokes and idioms are numerous, and the degree of malice towards them varies from harmless to highly aggressive.

4. Targets of ethnic jokes in British humour

Telling ethnic jokes in a professional context, in a multicultural environment, may negatively influence the atmosphere in the workplace, as the "targets" of the jokes could feel offended and react aggressively, refusing to cooperate with the colleagues who laugh at them or to recognize the authority of the superiors who make fun of their ethnicity. Especially ethnic humour that is used too early in a professional relationship, before knowing the co-workers' personalities, habits and communication styles, may lead to such negative consequences.

The examples below show the degrees of negativity implied by ethnic humour (i.e. jokes and idioms) from the milder ones, which can be told in certain contexts, if the interlocutors know each other well enough, to the extremely aggressive or even taboo ones, which should not be used in intercultural communication under any circumstances.

In the 17th century, Britain was often at war with the Netherlands, so the word "Dutch" entered the modern English language with a negative connotation, with a derogatory meaning in many of its usages, as proven by the following examples:

- (1) double Dutch = language that cannot be understood, nonsense, gibberish
- (2) to go Dutch = to pay for your part when you go out with a group
- (3) Dutch comfort = deriving comfort from the fact that things could be worse
- (4) to speak Dutch = to vomit (from the way the Dutch language sounds to a foreigner)
- (5) Dutch widow = prostitute (from an analogy to mechanical Dutch Wives and Dutch Husbands - life-sized machines used for masturbation)
- (6) Dutch agreement = an agreement made while intoxicated
- (7) Dutch courage = liquid courage provided by alcohol
- (8) Dutch generosity = stinginess. (The Free Dictionary, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/definition/english/Dutch>)

These idioms point to various faults in the "other", "the enemy", which, in the British mentality, is the old foe, the Dutch: stinginess, inability to speak English properly,

propensity for alcoholism and masturbation. Some of these idioms can be used in intercultural communication, with Dutch interlocutors, as they are harmless and quite frequent in spoken language, such as “to go Dutch” and “Dutch comfort”. Others can be used only with those Dutch co-workers you know well and can stand irony or are prone to self-deprecating humour themselves: “Dutch agreement”, “Dutch courage”, “Dutch generosity”. Yet there are some that should not be used in any context in which one of the interlocutors is Dutch, because they directly and meanly point to two elements of the Dutch identity: language and ingenuity (in the 17th century, the Dutch were famous for their inventions, since the mathematician and scientist Christiaan Huygens created a lot of automata for the King of France, including a machine that featured an entire fighting, mechanical army): “double Dutch”, “to speak Dutch” and “Dutch widow”.

Other nations that make the object of ethnic jokes in English are the French, the Chinese, the Spaniards and the Irish. Nevertheless, the idioms containing the names of these nationalities are not as offensive as the ones about the Dutch, so most of them can be used in intercultural communication, with the necessary precautions imposed by the interlocutors’ shared knowledge and time spent together:

- (1) to take French leave = to take time away from your job without asking for permission – a quite frequently used idiom in the workplace, as it funnily depicts a common reality (The Free Dictionary, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/definition/english/takeFrenchleave>)
- (2) Chinese copy = an exact imitation or duplicate that includes defects as well as desired qualities (The Free Dictionary, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/definition/english/Chinesecopy>)
- (3) Spanish athlete = someone who lies or exaggerates a lot, especially in order to get noticed – usually in front of a superior, as it frequently happens in the workplace (The Free Dictionary, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/definition/english/Spanishathlete>)
- (4) Irish bull = a ludicrous, incongruent or logically absurd statement (The Free Dictionary, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/definition/english/Irishbull>)

All these ethnic jokes and idioms are based on stereotypes about certain nations, especially in the context of professional communication in a multicultural environment (i.e. the French have a superficial attitude to work, the Chinese make money by selling imitations of famous brand products, the Spaniards lie and brag about their qualities in order to be noticed by their bosses, the Irish have the tendency to complicate things at work and to present logical facts in an illogical manner). In all these cases, stereotypes emerge from the perception of one’s superiority from the cultural viewpoint and, depending on the context and the people involved in communication, may be perceived very differently, from harmless humour to offensive speech acts.

The same idea, of superiority in front of “the other”, pervades the ethnic humour used in the professional communication of some officers from the police department in Ferguson, Missouri. Known for their racist behaviour and unorthodox practices, these policemen were included in an investigation made by the American Department of Justice and the conclusions were surprising: most of them not only spread malicious racist jokes via emails, but also made fun of the American president of that time, Barack Obama, heavily criticizing him and his wife for the only “guilt” of being Black. These high-level ethnic jokes are presented in detail in the following section of this article, which is

conceived as a case study meant to emphasize the impact of negative ethnic humour on someone's public image.

5. High-level ethnic jokes

An eloquent example of aggressive ethnic humour in professional communication is the one encouraged – for no less than three years in a row – by the members of the Police Department of Ferguson, Missouri. After an investigation made by the United States' Department of Justice, seven racist emails were brought to the public's attention – out of many that remained undisclosed. Although there were no specific accusations, after the investigation three police officers took an administrative leave and a fourth one was fired.

The problems with this police department were related not only to the racist jokes they spread via emails, but also to their entire racist behaviour. Ferguson's population is 67% African American, but most police officers are white and have a discriminatory attitude towards the Black people in the city. Between 2008 and 2015, more than 93% of all the fines, car searches and arrests concerned Black people and almost nine in ten cases implied the use of force or police dogs' bites.

The seven emails made public by the Department of Justice show that the police officers in Ferguson were laughing not only at Black people in general, but also at the American president of that time, Barack Obama and his wife. The most common stereotypes in their jokes were that Black people – including President Obama – look like apes, are lazy, commit crimes, live on social assistance and behave strangely in public. Only one of the seven jokes – the last one taken into consideration for the investigation, in 2011 – does not refer to the African Americans, but to the Muslims living in America; its actual content was not revealed for fear that it might stir the Muslim community's outrage.

The period during which the emails were sent by the police officers in Ferguson is quite long, between November 2008 and December 2011, and the investigation was completed in 2015, with a report made public by the Department of Justice. As the emails were written on the computers at the police department and sent from the addresses of the police stations, the actual extent of this racist phenomenon in the workplace could not be established, but the investigators think that most of the white police officers in the department were involved. The six examples below prove the aggressiveness of their language and the deep hatred they felt for the Black citizens of their community, as well as for President Obama and his wife.

The first email that was made public was written in November 2008 and stated that Barack Obama would not complete his presidential term of office, because no Black man could hold a steady job for four years. The other two emails related to the president were written in April 2011, when Barack Obama was depicted as a chimpanzee, and in October 2011, when a picture of bare-chested dancing Black women was tagged as "Michelle Obama's High-school Reunion". The mail that referred to African Americans living on state benefits and mocked Black people's way of speaking was sent in March 2010; it consisted of the following line: "I be so glad that dis be my last child support payment! Month after month, year after year, all dose payments!" The most offensive ethnic jokes contained in these emails are the ones sent in May and June 2011. The former stated: "An African American woman in New Orleans was admitted into the hospital for a pregnancy termination. Two weeks later she received a check for \$5,000.

She phoned the hospital to ask who it was from. The hospital said, 'Crimestoppers.' The latter had the form of an ad in the newspaper, in which a man declared that he was trying to obtain welfare for his dogs because they were "mixed in colour, unemployed, lazy, couldn't speak English and had no frigging clue who their Daddies were." (Hernandez 2015, 1)

This case study shows that even the representatives of law, who are supposed to protect the citizens irrespective of their race or nationality, are tempted to use ethnic humour in a wrong way, turning it into a weapon against those whom they should serve and respect. The racist jokes they spread functioned as a communication binder within the police department, but as a blocker in the communication between the officers and the African American citizens in their city, thus proving once again what Lenka Gogova claimed, that ethnic humour is a double-edged sword, which can be used either for attack or for protection.

6. Conclusions

The various examples of ethnic jokes and idioms provided in this article have shed some light not only on the role of humour in professional communication, but also on the anthropological dimension of humour as a reflection of a community's peculiarities. The reactions to this type of jokes are very different, from embarrassment to amusement and from anger to relief. Therefore, one should be aware of the context in which such jokes are told, of the target audience's ethnicity, level of understanding and tolerance and, last but not least, of the non-linguistic elements involved in this type of communication, such as the facial expression and the tone of the voice.

Wisely used, ethnic humour can highlight more the similarities within a group rather than the differences and should focus more on what people share rather than what distinguishes one nation from the others. A good ethnic joke can function as a stereotype breaker, as an example of folk wisdom, as an anthropological study in a nutshell, as an incentive to that kind of laughter that can cross ethnic and racial barriers.

On the contrary, if they are inappropriately used, ethnic jokes can build communication barriers, create a tense atmosphere in the workplace, undermine authority or even lead to drastic sanctions, as it happened to the police officers in Ferguson. Therefore, the main recommendation is to get to know the target audience very well before telling such a joke in front of them and to treat the others with due respect and tolerance, because, after all, it is not about what you say, it is about how you say it.

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