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Humour as a mediator in cross-cultural professional settings.

Examples from Danish and French

Lita Lundquist

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1. Humour as an issue in cross-cultural communication

Cross-cultural communication implies a host of possible barriers, not least in professional settings. Language, culture, mentality, and social norms ruling in work situations all add to putting successful communication at risk. For Danes and French, there are differences on several dimensions, and to a degree that it is reasonable to ask whether and how communication is even possible. Not only do the Danish and the French language show important systematic differences, but also, there exist considerable differences in mentality and social behaviour, stemming from different processes of civilisations in Denmark and France. Thus, there seems to be multiple barriers preventing communication between actors from the two language communities to ever be successful. There are, however, also factors, which may contribute to creating shared worlds between Danes and French, and it is my hypothesis that humour is one of them. In this paper, I set out to study whether the hypothesis that humour can neutralise linguistic and cultural barriers and create a shared world, if only momentarily, holds.

Below, I shall present arguments from different fields, which have struck me by the similarity with which they treat humour, first of all different trends within linguistics, but also psychology, which all emphasise humour as being a *double semiotic system*. But let me start with arguments from linguistics pinning down the differences between the Danish and the French language, differences which I shall link to Elias' theory about the civilisation process; next, linguistic and psychological theories about humour will be presented, and last I shall provide results from interviews carried out with Danish and French subjects about how they conceive of each other in general, and of the use of humour in professional situations in particular.

2 Barriers to cross-cultural communication between Danes and French

2.1 Different languages and language types

There are many fundamental, structural differences between the Danish and the French language, which make it reasonable to talk about two different language types. The differences are found at all linguistic levels, of which I shall mention just a few here, for illustrative purposes only.¹

The French language shows a preference for abstract verbs and for constructing sentences around nouns derived from such verbs. This lends an ‘*abstract*’ character to French, compared to Danish, where verbs are more ‘*concrete*’ (i.e. containing more specifying semantic features (Baron and Herslund 2005)); an example is the French verb ‘aller’, a manner-neutral verb, to which there is no immediate equivalent in Danish, as ‘gå’ contains the manner ‘on foot’. As Danish, in general, shows a preference for a verb-based text structure, in contrast to noun-based in French, Danish texts and communication will tend to reveal a more concrete character. An example from an EU-text (the preamble to the Nice Charter, 2000) illustrates this. The direct translation of French nominal constructions “L’Union contribue à *la préservation et au développement* de ces valeurs communes...”² into Danish “Unionen bidrager til *bevarelsen og udviklingen* af disse fælles værdier...” was considered more formal and less accessible by Danes than the verbal constructions in Danish “Unionen bidrager til *at bevare og udvikle* disse fælles værdier...”³. In fact, a reading and interpretation experiment showed that such ‘French’ constructions prevailing in the Danish version of the preamble, made reading and comprehension more difficult, creating a general suspicion among Danes towards the EU-project (Lundquist & Gabrielsen 2004).

In French texts, a common way to present information is via presupposing constructions, that is, in *presuppositions*. This is especially frequent in the use of so-called ‘unfaithful anaphors’ in French, by means of which a former discourse referent is referred to with a

¹ This short survey of differences is based on linguistic features investigated and brought to light in the research project TypoLex at the Copenhagen Business School (Herslund & Baron 2003, Korzen & Lundquist 2005).

² ‘The Union contributes to *the preservation* and to *the development* of these common values.’

³ ‘The Union contributes *to preserve* and *to develop* these common values.’

new noun. Thus, the following chain of unfaithful anaphors found in a French obituary about Ronald Reagan presupposes that the reader creates an identity relation between Reagan and these descriptions: “Le 40e président américain –l’ancien acteur – ce cow-boy de cinéma – ce paresseux – le chef du monde libre – ce patriote – le président Teflon – le vainqueur de la guerre froide“. Danes seem more inclined to use *assertions*, meaning that in the present example, the identity between Ronald Reagan and the 40th American president (etc.) would probably have been explicitly asserted: “Reagan, who was the 40th American president, ...” (Lundquist 2006).

This difference between using presuppositions or assertions can be described as a difference in the ‘*epistemic contract of communication*’ prevailing in the two language communities (Givón 2001 p.253; Lundquist 2004). According to Givón’s distinction, one could conceive the typical French contract of communication (in written texts at least) to be information presented as uncontested knowledge not open to challenge by the hearer, whereas in the assertive contract of communication which seems to prevail in Danish the speaker takes the hearer to be unfamiliar with the information presented, which is hence open to challenge by the hearer. This difference in epistemic contract entails that the French seem to communicate in an often *implicit* style, in contrast to Danes being more *explicit*.

French language provides for *hierarchical structure* in text and communication, in that information in sentences is often organised in *subordinate* structures (via e.g. non finite verb forms). In comparison, Danish language facilitates a *linear structure* in that information tends to be presented and organised in *coordinate* sentences (which have verbs in finite form (present, past, etc.) as their centre). Here another example from the EU-preamble can serve as illustration: “Les peuples de l’Europe, *en établissant* entre eux une union sans cesse plus étroite, ont décidé de partager un avenir pacifique fondé sur des valeurs communes”,⁴ in which the subordinate emphasised verbal construction would best be rendered in Danish via a coordination of the two verbs: “De europæiske folk *har skabt* en stadig snævrere sammenslutning og dermed *besluttet* at dele en fremtid, der bygger på fælles værdier”⁵ (Lundquist & Gabrielsen 2004 : 128; Lundquist 2005).

⁴ ‘The peoples of Europe, *creating* an ever closer union among them, are resolved to share a peaceful future based on common values.’

⁵ ‘The European peoples *have created* an ever closer union and *thereby resolved* to ...’

Last point to be mentioned here is that Danish is a very ‘*intimate*’ language, as compared to the more ‘*neutral*’ or ‘*distant*’ French. In typological terms, Danish is a ‘receiver oriented language’ (Durst-Andersen 1992) as compared to French being a ‘world-oriented language’. This shows not least in the predilection in Danish for using ‘modifying particles’, such as *jo, nok, vel, da, så, lidt, lige*, etc., which imply that sender and receiver are already sharing common knowledge about the state-of-affairs referred to. A short survey of weather reports from Danish television (DR1, TV2) has shown that such particles, which I shall term *bonding particles*, are extremely frequent, the 32 most frequent covering from 7 to 16% of the total sum of words used (spoken language).

The linguistic differences,⁶ summarised below, explain why Danes and French⁷ may be predisposed towards different kinds of communication. The question whether such differences in national language have an impact on national/cultural identity and mentality is left open so far:

French	Danish
nouns	verbs
abstract	concrete
presuppositions/implicit	assertions/explicit
hierarchical	linear
distant	intimate

Figure 1: Structural differences between the French and the Danish language

2.2 Different contracts of communication

The above-mentioned differences in language structure probably also influence how communication in general takes place within the French and Danish language community respectively. In linguistic

⁶ To which more could be added (Lundquist 2007; Lundquist 2008).

⁷ These findings are valid not only for Danish and French, but for other languages as well belonging to the Germanic and Romance language family, respectively. In fact, the former have been called ‘endocentric languages’ because the informational weight is put in the centre of the sentence, in contrast to ‘exocentric languages’ as the Romance languages, where the information tends to be encapsulated in the nouns (nominal arguments) surrounding the verb (Herslund & Baron 2003, Korzen & Lundquist 2005).

terms we can, as mentioned above, talk about two different types of “contract of communication” (Givòn 2001). The French language structure, with its tendency of being hierarchical, noun-based, abstract, implicit and distant tends to align French with a contract of communication of the *expository* or the *argumentative text type*, which is considered close to an abstract line of reasoning (Lundquist 2006a; Lundquist 2008). The specific structure of the Danish language, on the other hand, which invites to use a linear, verb-based, concrete, explicit and bonding form of communication, seems to align Danish with contracts of communication closer to the *narrative* and *expressive* text types, more casuistic and factual in their line of reasoning.⁸

Intuitively, it is natural to ask whether this difference in contracts of communication may again cause asymmetries in power relations between Danes and French. The relation of language with power relations is the topic of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2001; 1997), and though he probably did not think of power relations across language barriers, his statement that “One must not forget that the relations of communication *par excellence* – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (Bourdieu 1997: 37), would certainly be of acute interest for this problem also. In stead of pursuing this issue, I shall, however, explore some obvious relations between the linguistic characteristics of the French and the Danish language on the one hand, and mentality and culture on the other.

2.3 Different mentality and culture

Language has often been linked to mentality (Humboldt 1988) and to the affective moulding of people, which again has been seen as a result of specific processes of civilisation (Elias 1994). In this vein, I have found interesting matches between the above characteristic of the French language on the one hand, and Elias’ social theories about the French society on the other, especially concerning the aspect of *hierarchy*, which shall be useful for the study of the use of humour also.

⁸ Compare with the following characteristic of French reasoning within law in terms of “A predilection for abstraction over casuistry correlating with an institutional prioritization of “law” over “fact” (Pierre Legrand, lecture given at the CBS, February 2009. See also Baron 2007.

2.3.1 France as a hierarchic society

According to Elias (Elias 1994) French civilisation (as compared to the German) has been shaped by a very specific process of civilisation, emanating from the king and the court. I shall contend myself at this point by giving some quotations from Elias:

The social units that we call nations differ widely in *the personality structure* of their members, in *the schemata by which the emotional life of the individual is molded* under the pressure of institutionalized tradition and of the present situation” (Elias 1994: 27) (my emphases)

The specific affective moulding of the French is a

“direct continuation of the courtly-aristocratic tradition of the seventeenth century (...) when the bourgeoisie became a nation, much of what had originally been the specific and distinctive social character of the courtly aristocracy and also of the courtly-bourgeois groups, became, in an ever-widening movement and doubtless with some modification, the national character. *Stylistic conventions, the forms of social intercourse, conversation, articulateness of language* and much else – all this is first formed in France within courtly society, then slowly changes, in a continuous diffusion, from a social into a *national character*.” (Elias 1994: 30) (my emphases).

This leads, still according to Elias, to a hierarchy of society, since molded by people who “could parade their status, while also observing the subtleties of social intercourse, marking their exact relation to everyone above and below them in their manner of greeting and their choice of words”, short, in order to “*make visible the hierarchy of society*”. This “pressure of court life” with

“the necessity to distinguish oneself from others and to fight for opportunities with relatively peaceful means, through intrigue and diplomacy, enforced *a constraint on the affects, a self-discipline and self-control, a peculiarly courtly rationality*” (Elias 1994 p.268) (my emphases).

For Elias, such characteristics stemming from a particular form of process of civilisation – in France descending from court society – « bears witness to a particular structure of human relations, to a particular social structure, and to the corresponding form of behaviour » (Elias 1994 p.47).

It is my assumption that the characteristic type of civilisation contributes to differences between French and Danish ‘mentality’, which were also identified as explainable by linguistic factors.

2.3.2 Denmark as a horizontal society

In comparison, Denmark has been shaped, by its own specific process of civilisation, into a horizontal form of societal organisation. I shall quote extensively from the Danish historian and journalist Jacques Berg (2007) who writes (translated from Danish):

(In Denmark) culture did not descend from above; it developed within a local sociological and economical community. It became popular⁹. (...) Perhaps that’s what gave the Danes a chance to encourage forms of social intercourse, which were not only civility and courtesy, but which corresponded to every day’s demand for co-operation and solidarity. (...)

It is true, however, that a lot of signals of civilisation descended from the Danish court society, from nobility and big citizens (...). But these signals were not, as they were in France, perceived as a diktat or as an ideal. The Danish countryman and citizen adopted a rather free attitude to the model from above. In stead he used the model at hand, which was practical and down-to-earth (Berg 2007: 140).

The French sociologist Patrick Baudry hits the same point, when he refers to the “*Verticalité française*” (Baudry 2003: 57, 92, 95), which he compares to the American horizontality (Baudry 2003 p.122).

These sociological concepts of horizontality and verticality in societal organisation are interesting, because they link so neatly to the linguistic concepts of linear and hierarchical sentence and text structure, which have been brought out as being characteristic of the Danish and the French language respectively, as shown above. It is in this interesting intersection of linguistics and sociology that I want to situate my investigation of cross-cultural use of humour in professional settings, pursuing the hypothesis, I recall, that linguistic barriers in cross-cultural communication can be overcome by the use of humour, because of humour’s specific semiotic system and psychological effects.

⁹ “Folkelig”.

3 Humour

3.1 Humour in linguistic theories

Among the many forms of humour, focus will be put here on *humour based on words*, that is, on the ‘Witz’ in Freud’s terminology (Freud 1981; Freud 1981)¹⁰ and not on clownesque humour as treated in Bergson “Le rire” (Bergson 1981). Furthermore, we shall not treat canned jokes but narrow down on spontaneous situation witticisms, which, in a foreign language communication, are often due to unconscious *lapsus linguae*. It is therefore only natural to search for explanations in linguistic and semiotic theories. Reading through this literature one is struck by the recurrent explanation of humour as being a *second-level* or a *double system of signs*. This goes for the seminal book of Viktor Raskin, “Semantic Mechanisms of Humor” from 1985, as well as for earlier and later works in semiotics and linguistics, to which I shall refer shortly.

3.1.1 Viktor Raskin’s semantic theory of humour

Raskin (1985) describes the structure of an “Act of humour” as “the simultaneous perception of two different things” , “a funny reconciliation of two irreconcilables”, and more specifically as the “compatibility with two different scripts, which are opposites”. This forms the main hypothesis of his script-based semantic- theory of humour, which goes like this:

“A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the (following) conditions (...) are satisfied:

- i. The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
- ii. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (...)” (Op.cit. p.99)

¹⁰ I shall use the term ‘witz’ in the following as a neologism in English to avoid the more general word ‘joke’, which however is used in the English translation of Freud’s work (Freud 2003)), together with the terms ‘wit’ and ‘witticism’, of the same derivation as ‘witz’ but with different accentuations (personal communication with Per Øhrgaard).

The notion of *scripts* have been around in linguistic and cognitive theories as a framework for representing knowledge since Minsky (1968), and it has developed into concepts such as *mental spaces* and *mental models* or *representations*, which all refer to the mental picture called to mind when deciphering a linguistic message. Raskin's script-based model of humour sticks however close to word semantics, where words, i.e., lexicon, are seen as the humour-provoking factor. A useful elaboration in this direction would be to integrate later work on word semantics in the vein of the "generative lexicon" (Pustejovsky 1995).

Raskin also proposes an interesting explanation of the act of humour in *pragmatic terms*. The normal way of conveying information in ordinary communication is the *bona-fide communication mode*, that is, the "no lying, no-acting, no-joking mode" (Op.cit. p. 88). In humour, the *bona-fide mode* is changed into a *non-bona-fide mode*, without the perception of which the words would simply not be taken as a joke, but as a simple, but probably strange, assertion. This goes, as we shall see, for the frequent use among Danes of irony, an example of a *non-bona-fide* communication, often not perceived as such by Frenchmen.

3.1.2. Roland Barthes' second level semiotic system

An earlier impetus in the direction of treating specific forms of communication as a combination of different levels of signs is seen in Roland Barthes' treatment of the myth (Barthes 1957). In order to describe the specific character of the act of humour, let us replace the 'mythe' in the following quotation by the 'witz' in order to see that humour is a *second semiotic system* since it builds on signs which are already there:

« (...) le mythe est un système particulier en ceci qu'il s'édifie à partir d'une chaîne sémiologique qui existe avant lui : *c'est un système sémiologique second* » (Barthes 1957 p.199).

Before presenting newer linguistic theories with relevance for the understanding of the functioning of the witz, let us illustrate its 'doubleness' as identified in Raskin's and Barthes' models.

WITZ EXAMPLES

The following examples of the 'doubleness' in the act of humour come from French media. The first, "*Galeries Lafayette*" ("Gallery Bankruptcy"), was heard on the French radio (November 2008) during the looming financial crisis. Here we have a play on words with the name of the big French

warehouse *Galeries Lafayette*. Linguistically, the technique – referring here to Freud’s very perspicacious linguistic analysis of the ‘techniques’ of the witz (see below) – is subtle. It is very *economic* as shown in the linguistic analysis below. In fact, phonetically, the linguistic substitution exists in *one minimal pair* only, [e] as opposed to [i]:

Galeries Lafayette [fa-**jet**]

Galeries Lafaille [fa-**jit**]

This minimal linguistic substitution, however, suffices to bring two scripts together, viz. 1) the name of a warehouse and 2) bankruptcy. The blending of the two semantic scripts creates *the new meaning* in the sense of “Galeries Lafayette is to collapse”, which is, of course, far from funny in itself.

The economy of the expression “Galeries Lafaille” adds to the elegance of this witz, since ‘brevity is the body and soul of the wit, indeed, it is wit itself’¹¹ (quotation from Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik I*, §45, quoted in (Freud 2003: 5)). The spelling out of this witz, as of any other witz based on similar techniques of condensation and economy, would totally kill the effect of humour.

The second example is from the French satirical newspaper, *Le Canard enchaîné* (June 4th, 2008):

Les partenaires soucieux.

This witz is founded on the expression ‘les partenaires sociaux’¹², which is distorted by being mixed with another sign ‘soucieux’¹³. It builds upon and reuses the already existing (fixed) expression, adding a new signification, while still maintaining the old ones. Linguistically, the technique is very *economic* as shown in the analysis below:

les partenaires soucieux

les partenaires sociaux

¹¹ In the original German version: ”Kürze ist der Körper und die Seele des Witzes, ja er selbst” (Freud 1981: 11).

¹² ‘Social partners’, ‘unions and management, management and labour’ (dictionary Le Robert & Collins, senior); ‘arbejdsmarkedsparter’ in Danish.

¹³ ‘Worried, concerned’.

Phonetically, the linguistic substitution exists in *two minimal pairs*:

[susjø]

[sosjo]

Semantically, however, the change of sense is comprehensive. From a fixed expression, from the societal domain, to an evaluative, axiological and argumentative expression, which still, however, keeps intact the first expression.¹⁴ And cognitively the bringing together of two scripts from different domains causes surprise and smile, in spite of its serious context.

The last example comes from the French newspaper *Le Monde* (February 2009), a satirical drawing (by Plantu) with the headline, *Impunité*, and the word *Impoutinité*, hovering over the dead body of Anna Politkovskaïa. The two signs intertwine to create the sense that Poutine’s actions take place with complete impunity. The blending here is not only of scripts – semantic, political, and legal scripts based on comprehensive background knowledge – but also of sounds and word syllables, with the phonetical change of ‘py’ to ‘pu’ and the addition of ‘ti’:

Impunité	[ë	py	ni	te]
Poutine		pu ti	n	
Impoutinité	[ë	pu ti	ni	te]

These examples suffice for now for illustrating the double-character of the witz, and for leading up to the very important notion of *linguistic economy* in creating surprising and new cognitive effects, an economy which is crucial for the effectiveness of a witz, as so correctly seen by Freud. Before presenting his psychological theory of the witz, let us round up by two newer linguistic theories, which both point in the same direction.

3.1.3 Cognitive theory of mapping mental spaces

Linking language to cognition, Gilles Fauconnier’s theory on *mapping between mental spaces* (Fauconnier 1999) seems promising for the explanation of the witz also, since “mappings between

¹⁴ Morphologically, the two contrasting words differ in their derivation: *souci-eux* (from noun to adjective), *social-aux* (from adjective singular to plural).

domains” are considered to be “at the heart of the unique human cognitive faculty of producing, transferring, and processing meaning” (Op.cit. p.: 1). A special case of mapping is ‘blending’, described in these terms:

“Blending is in principle a simple operation, but in practice gives rise to myriad possibilities. It operates on two Input mental spaces to yield a third space, the blend. The blend inherits partial structure from the input spaces and has *emergent structure of its own*.” (Fauconnier 1999: 149) (my emphasis).

Fauconnier’s concept of mental space is close to Raskin’s scripts but expands the cognitive dimension; what is new is the emphasis put on the *emergent structure* of the blend, that is, on the creation of *new meaning*. In the example above of ‘les partenaires soucieux’, we experience the blending of the two mental spaces inherited from ‘les partenaires sociaux’ and ‘soucieux’ respectively, whereas ‘*the emergent mental space*’ equals the effect of the witz. Furthermore, the witz belongs to other forms of thought, as e.g. metaphors, which are “*creative* in the sense that they produce *new links, new configurations, and correspondingly, new meaning and novel conceptualization*.” (Fauconnier 1999: 149) (my emphases). Exactly the same characteristic goes for the two other examples, “Galeries Lafayette” and “Impoutinité”.

3.1.4 Cognitive pragmatics and Relevance theory

Within another branch of cognitive linguistics, *cognitive pragmatics*, special uses of language such as metaphor and irony have been treated within the general framework of the so-called *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Cognitive relevance in general is described in ‘economic’ terms, as corresponding to *maximum cognitive effects* (in terms of inferred assumptions) with *minimal cognitive efforts*. This links neatly to Freud’s assumption on the one hand about the ‘brevity’ of a witz being its very essence, (see more below), and on the other to the considerable (cognitive) effect caused by a witz (via the inferred assumptions). As concerns the use of irony, Sperber and Wilson see it as a figure of “echoing”, i.e., ironic utterances are echoing since they are “second-degree interpretations of somebody else’s thought” (with a certain sceptical, amused, reproving attitude) (Sperber and Wilson 1995 p.238). Thus, irony – just as myth and humour – is explainable as a second-degree sign also within this specific linguistic-cognitive explanation.

3.1.5 Humour in a foreign language

The semiotic, linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic explanations mentioned above all emphasise the particularity of humour as being a ‘second-degree’ sign, which draws upon already existing signs. For humour, as for myth, metaphor and irony, the identification and interpretation of the second degree sign may of course bring about additional problems for a foreign language user, namely problems of a second-order, in the sense that a *double interpretation* is needed in order to reach a full understanding of the utterance. In a second step, this double interpretation demands the activation and mapping of two scripts, or “blending of two mental spaces”, which are not always easily available to the language user who acts in a foreign context. And last but not least, one should not forget the fundamental condition for perceiving an act of humour, which is the recognition that the act of communication has to be changed from a *bona-fide mode* to a *non-bona fide mode*. All this puts considerable demands on a foreign language user, not least in stressful professional settings.

The interviews will cast light on how language users perceive the use of humour in real life situations, and reveal whether humour is possible under such linguistic and cognitive conditions. In order to understand why it is worth using humour at all, with all the risks involved, let us now turn to Freud’s theory on humour.

3.2 The psychological effect of humour

Freud (Freud 1981; Freud 1994; Freud 2003) has shown how the witz, by making a linguistic shortcut between two often contrasting domains, psychologically cheats upon inner and outer (self)control systems in the form of reason, logic, outer and inner censorship, power relations, critique and constraints, thus creating a feeling of pleasure, of relief and connivance.

Freud commences his treatment of the witz, the *joke* – in English sometimes called ‘wit’ conceived as an uncountable noun, sometimes termed by the countable ‘*witticism*’ – by investigating its technique. He starts out with an example close to the three proposed above (‘Galleries La Faillite’, ‘les partenaires soucieux’, ‘Impoutinité’), namely the following joke:

(...) I sat next to Salomon Rothschild and he treated me just like his equal, quite *famillionairely* (Freud 2003).

Elaborating on the linguistic form of the witz, Freud describes it as an *abbreviation* with ‘*concentrating force*’; in technical terms “a *condensation* with *substitute-formation*” (Freud 2003) (my emphases). As the condensation is more accused in German than in English, because of the derivation of the English adverb by the suffix ‘-ly’, we shall quote the more elegant German version.

”(...) Ich sass neben Salomon Rotschild und er behandelte mich ganz wie seinesgleichen, ganz famillionär”¹⁵ (Freud 1981: 13).

Freud illustrates the linguistic form – the technique – of this witz in the subsequent formula, in which we see a movement exactly parallel to the ones described in the theories above about mapping scripts or blending mental spaces.

Famili	är	
<u>Mili</u>	<u>o</u>	<u>när</u>
Famili	o	när

Brevity is crucial but not, however, “in itself witty, otherwise every pithy remark would be a witticism. The brevity of witticisms must be of a particular kind” (Freud 2003 p.19).¹⁶ What is important for Freud, is that the “brevity of a witticism is often the result of a particular process which leaves a second trace – the formation of a substitute – in the wording of the witticism” (Op.cit. p.20). This ‘second trace’, which Freud shall develop as being similar to the functioning of dreams in the latent dream work, links in our perspective to the doubleness of humour pointed out in the linguistic theories above.

What shall retain us here is the effect of *pleasure* caused by a witz, about which Freud has the following to say (and much more of course). Distinguishing between *tendentious jokes* and *innocuous jokes* (Op.cit. p.113), the former permit to get around some external obstacle, whereas

¹⁵ This very example and its translation from German into English clearly show how the linguistic (condensating) form of a witz is dependant on a particular language and its rules for e.g. word formation.

¹⁶ Please note yet another translation, ‘witticism’, for the German ‘Witz’, witnessing a lacuna in the English language for this particular phenomenon.

the latter make it possible to overcome an internal obstacle and lift an internal inhibition. To this comes that “the gain in pleasure caused by a joke corresponds to the saving in psychical expenditure” (Op.cit. p.114) – “here we begin to suspect that *economizing in psychical expenditure* altogether must have a far more comprehensive meaning, and we must consider it a possibility that a closer definition of this still very unclear concept of “psychical expenditure” may bring us closer to the essential nature of the joke” (Op.cit. p.115; my emphasis).

We shall leave Freud’s speculations on the “psychical expenditure” here for a while, but emphasise the obvious link between ‘saving in physical expenditure’ and the concept of ‘cognitive relevance’, mentioned above in terms of ‘maximum cognitive effects with minimum cognitive efforts’. What interests us in particular is the notion of *pleasure* in combination *with lift of internal inhibitions and external constraints*, which seems as called for in stressful cross-cultural and cross-linguistic work situations.

3.3 Humour – social aspects

Bruno Latour’s “Actor-Network-Theory” (ANT) for Reassembling the Social (Latour 2005), a meta-sociologic theory on socio-logy, seems to be promising for the linguistic study of humour as well, because there are so many obvious parallels to semiotic, cognitive, and linguistic concerns and methods, which constitute the focus of the present article.

Rejecting the concept of a ‘social group’ as something glued together by some solid, durable stuff (by ‘dominant power relations’ e.g.), Latour prefers to talk about a ‘social tie’ which can be likened to a “*momentary association* (...) characterized by the way it gathers into *new shapes*” (Latour 2005: 65. My emphasis). ‘Social’, for Latour, is to be conceived in the sense of “a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrolment”(Latour 2005: 64-5). It seems to me that humour and the effect it may create, is a perfect example of such a *social tie*, being par excellence a momentary association, a movement, a transformation, a translation, and an enrolment into new social shapes.

Latour operates with the concepts of ‘intermediary’ as opposed to ‘mediator’. Whereas for the first, “there is no mystery since inputs predict outputs fairly well (and) nothing will be present in the effect that has not been in the cause”, “for *mediators* the situation is different:

causes do not allow effects to be deduced as they are simply offering *occasions*, circumstances, and precedents. As a result, lots of *surprising aliens* may pop up in between” (Latour 2005: 58-9. My emphasis). Considering humour as a mediator presenting occasions for new aliens to pop up, my investigation shall have as one of its aims to look into these *aliens*, which seem to correspond to the notion of ‘*emergent structures*’ proposed by the cognitive theory of mappings in thought and language presented above.

Latour is quite explicit about *literary methods* being relevant for sociological research also. Thus he recommends the use of the notion *actant* from Greimas’s model of *actancy* together with *figuration* (Greimas 1966), Latour argues:

Because they deal with fiction, literary theorists have been much freer in their enquiries about figuration than any social scientist, especially when they have used semiotics or the various narrative sciences. This is because, for instance in a fable, the same actant can be made to act through the agency of a magic wand, a dwarf, a thought in the fairy’s mind, or a knight killing two dozen dragons. (...). (Latour 2005: 54)

Continuing in this direction, Latour would probably be happy to learn that many of the concepts he proposes can be directly elaborated on when linked to linguistics, not least to models within cognitive linguistics. Thus, when advocating for literary methods in the terms reported below, all his examples are semantically akin by being in the *passive form* where the omitted subject is seen semantically as the passive ‘victim’, i.e., the PATIENT, which corresponds to the actant OBJECT in Greimas’ actancy model (Greimas 1966).¹⁷:

(...) once the difference between actant and agency is understood, various sentences such as ‘moved by our own interest’, ‘taken over by social imitation’, ‘victims of social structure’, ‘carried over by routine’, ‘called by God’, ‘overcome by destiny’, ‘made by our own will’, ‘held up by norms’, and ‘explained by capitalism’ become fully comparable. (Latour 2005: 55)

A similar linguistic elaboration presents itself in connection with Latour’s claim that also objects participate in the course of a social action. Here he enumerates a series of actions that objects,

¹⁷ This model has been exploited in a recent anthology (Villemoes et al. 2006) with discourse analyses of texts produced in the wake of the cow disease (Lundquist 2006a; Lundquist 2006b).

things (such as knives, kettles, hammers, locks, etc.) may do in a series of ‘metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence’:

things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on (Latour 2005: 72)

Looking for the verbs that would fit best for describing the effect of humour in this enumeration, I suppose it would be *allow, afford, encourage, permit, render possible*. They are all verbs, which within the framework of another cognitive theory, namely Talmy’s theory of *Force Dynamics*, would be explained as ‘removing an antagonistic force’ (Lihn Jensen 2006; Lundquist 2006b). This is a prediction, which will be put to test in the interviews below.

4 Interviews

On order to gain knowledge as to how Danes and Frenchmen perceive of each other, and communicate and use humour with each other, two series of interviews were carried out: five with Danes living and working in France, and five with French living and working in Denmark. The interviews were semi-structured around six introductory questions,¹⁸ which were in the natural course of the interview followed up by probing and specifying questions (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: box 7.1). The participants being more than willing to talk – humour as a mediator! – the interviews lasted on the average around 30 minutes, with two extremes of 12 and 49 minutes respectively. Below we shall focus on the cultural differences mentioned by the two groups, and continue with some examples of acts of humour experienced in their working situations.¹⁹

4.1 Interviews with Danes

The interviews took place in Paris, November 2008, with Danes (3 women and 2 men) working at official and semi-official Danish institutions. All communicated with French colleagues – official

¹⁸ Questions asked in Danish and French were: 1) For how long have you lived/worked in Denmark/France? 2) In which language do you communicate with Danes/ French? 3) Do you have any problems communicating with Danes/ French? 4) Do you – or your Danish/French interlocutor – use humour when communicating? 5) Could you tell an incident when this happened? 6) Please describe the Danes/ the French in three words.

¹⁹ More thorough linguistic and sociological analyses will be presented in later studies.

institutions, clients, tradesmen, personnel, etc. – in French, fluent French for 4 of them. The interviews were carried out in Danish.

4.1.1 Cultural differences

Asked to describe the French “in three words”, the five Danish subjects came up with the following characteristics (translated from Danish):²⁰

- formal, respect authorities, knowledgeable
- pride, formal, elegance
- “a ‘no’ in France is not necessarily a ‘no’”
- superficial, considerate
- respectful and gallant, they complain all the time, individualists

These characteristics are perfectly in line with the suggestions made by Elias above as to the “courtly-aristocratic” tradition so special for the civilization process of the French (respectful, gallant, pride, respect authorities, considerate), with the very specific stylistic conventions and forms of social intercourse (formal, elegance). To this come features to be linked to a later, revolutionary ‘liberalist’ tradition,²¹ namely features such as ‘individualists’ and ‘they complain all the time’. Asked to evaluate the qualifications proposed by their Danish counterparts on French, the French subjects themselves highly agreed upon these characteristics.

Another of the Danes’ qualifications tells more about the Danes than the French, viz. ‘a ‘no’ in France is not necessarily a ‘no’’, which points to the pragmatic attitude of Danes, often alluded to in the interviews.²² And finally the term, ‘superficial’, stemming from a young Dane with only three months experience in France is probably due to the fact that he mistook a fixed greeting expression, ‘Comment cela va?’ for a literal. However, two French subjects agreed upon this characteristic also.

²⁰ ” formelle, autoritetstro, vidende; stolthed, formelle, elegance; ”et nej i Frankrig er ikke nødvendigvis et nej”, overfladiskhed, ømhed; respekt og galante, de brokker sig, individualister”

²¹ Kohn 1955 qualifies the period 1789-1875 as a liberal period in “the making of the modern French mind”, i.e. a period where “liberalism existed as a doctrine and a program...” (Kohn 1955: 34-35).

²² A point to be taken up in a later study of Danes’ and Frenchmen’s attitude to religion, school, work, etc. (Weber 2003 (1905)).

4.1.2 Examples of humour in French professional settings

Of the five Danish subjects, only three had experienced humour in their professional relations with French colleagues, one used it all over in all types of relations, another only with people she knew well.²³ Of the two who did not use humour with their French counterparts, one (the young man mentioned above) was impeded by what he felt were insufficient language skills in French, the other, the director of the enterprise, refrained from using humour for the following reasons:²⁴

(...) you have to be *extremely well acquainted with the foreign language* before you can use humour – at a certain level – *at the level I want humour to be used* (...)

I guess I would be careful in using humour – towards a French person – *with whom I am not acquainted beyond professional relations* (...)

I do not think it would be correct (to use humour in professional relations). For - *It is also important that you are perceived of as serious* (...)

These quotations contain important insight into psychological and social reasons for not using humour in foreign language professional settings: the asymmetry felt in linguistic power, the split between professional and private spheres, and the need to appear ‘serious’ (and not playful) in professional – French? – settings. The first example below shows that these barriers can be done away with by using humour, be it only unconsciously, or rather because of being unconscious. The second example illustrates a situation of typical ‘Danish irony’.

LAPSUS LINGUAE

The Danish subject, a woman then in her twenties, had a job selling Danish furniture in a department store in Paris, BHV, Bazar Hotel de Ville. She tells (translated almost word by word from Danish):

²³ And the third, a woman in her early forties, gave an example of very offensive humour, which in fact was not humour but an idiom.

²⁴ Translated from Danish.

I had to reduce the prices of furniture, Danish furniture that is, and then someone passed by and asked 'what are you doing', and I said 'j'en ai marre, je monte la moitié des prix, et je baise les autres'²⁵ ☺ ☺ Within two minutes, there came a new one asking 'what are you doing' and within ten minutes, ten more came up to ask ...and then I realised that I should not 'baise' them, but 'diminuer' them, and then it was no longer fun.

What we have here, is a very nice *lapsus linguae*, of which the subject became aware only later, as stated in the interview:

I couldn't tell the difference between voiced and unvoiced 's'.

In fact, the speaker confounds the verbs 'baisser' [bese] (to decrease) and 'baiser' [beze] (to fuck²⁶), a clear example of a *minimal phonetical difference* with a huge social effect. Not only did a lot of persons 'come up/pass by' to ask in order to have the 'act of humour' repeated, but also the French boss himself turned up

to talk about 'poignée d'amour', saying what's happening, he was typical... My Danish boss came down to Paris at some particular time, saying "you must not transcend barriers", (...) I didn't understand a word of it; but it turned out that he (the French boss) was dating all of them, that was the only way to rise in the hierarchy, but he didn't dare with me, I was hired from the outside (...)

As the functioning of this pun or unconscious play on words is representative for the 'witz' in general, and for social relations in professional cross-cultural settings in particular, I shall comment on it in detail.

FROM LAPSUS LINGVAE TO WITZ

In Freudian terms, this witz functions via a very economical technique with the minimal opposition between unvoiced and voiced 's/z':²⁷

²⁵ 'I am fed up, I increase half of the prices, and I fuck the others'.

²⁶ 'baiser': vulgar usage 'to screw, lay, fuck', Le Robert & Collins Senior.

²⁷ As all consonants are unvoiced in Danish, the Danish speaker has probably been so eager to be over-correct, with the result of being incorrect.

‘baisser’ [bese]

‘baiser’ [beze]

Due to its linguistic brevity, this witz is a radical ‘abbreviation’ with ‘concentrating force’ of two contrasting domains (Freud)²⁸, namely 1) reducing the price of furniture and 2) laying (female) colleagues. It presents, in other words, as seen above, ‘a funny reconciliation of two irreconcilable scripts’ (Raskin), a ‘blending of two mental spaces’ with an emergent structure of its own’ (Fauconnier), an emergent structure, which equals the effect of its witz. The witz, innocuous and unconscious as it is, transcends a sexual taboo, in a pleasurable way, and thus cheats upon (self)control systems ‘in the form of (...) outer and inner censorship, (and) power relations’ (Freud). Saving psychical expenditure by its ‘linguistic shortcut’, it releases a lot of energy. This energy is transferred into at least 10 colleagues and the boss ‘coming up’ and mentally involving them-selves in the ‘act of humour’, which acts as a perfect ‘mediator’ and ‘creator of a new social tie’ (Latour).

It is in this specific movement of the witz:

linguistic shortcut -> bringing together two scripts -> transcending (self)control and censorship -> breaking (sexual) taboos -> saving and generating psychical energy -> creating pleasure -> forming new social ties

that I see the possibility for the act of humour to neutralise linguistic, cultural, and professional barriers and create a shared world, also in cross-cultural and –linguistic situations. Or maybe even *especially* in cross-cultural and –linguistic situations, in which a speaker may inadvertently happen to make puns in the form of *lapsus linguae* without the interlocutor taking offense, because s/he is aware of the involuntary linguistic distortion. In fact, for foreign language speakers, “their ignorance is pardonable because it is foreign languages that they are not proficient in” (Raskin 1985: 185).

This tolerance towards non native speakers is perhaps even more common for French people because of the ‘courtly-aristocratic tradition’ with its emphasis on ‘respect’ for others, a characteristic emphasised among ‘the three words’ to qualify Frenchmen. It is also, I suppose, the feature hinted at by the expression ‘considerate’ used by one of the Danes.

²⁸ Succinct references to section 2 above.

The language distortion in the above case is so evident that it is instantly interpreted as a *non bona-fide communication* (Raskin, see above) by the native speakers, with no risk of being mistaken for a *bona-fide communication*. A lesson to be drawn from this example, with some precaution of course, is that as a foreign language speaker, one should not fear making *lapsus linguae*, as these function as perfect mediators of new social ties, and of more relaxed social ties to that.

IRONY

The second example of an ‘act of humour’ between a Danish and a French person in a professional situation presents an act of irony. It was told in these terms (translated word to word from Danish), by the subject, a woman in her fifties:

A: (...) you can use humour with someone (...) who has been in contact with Danes for a long time — for instance, the man whom I order travels at, him I can call up and say “Oui, bonjour, c’est la vieille”²⁹, (...) and then he calls me up and says “Salut la vieille”³⁰. But --- it is not something, which harms him (...) it is more self---

Q: it is more you that ..., it is more self ironical? – he can call when you have started.

A: But, he has been in contact with Danes for a long, long time --- so the French have to learn also...

This is an example of *self-depreciating* humour (Raskin 1985: 22), an example of the legendary Danish ‘self-irony’, used here to transcend the social taboo of not talking about a woman’s age. The irony was started by the target, the ‘butt’, of the irony herself, and only taken up by her interlocutor because he had known her professionally for a long time. It is difficult to imagine the French man suggesting this act of humour by himself, on his own initiative. In fact, irony seems not to *create* social ties in France, in contrast to the *lapsus linguae* above, but to *presuppose* them.

In Denmark, it seems that irony can be used even without previous relations between the two interlocutors. This is mentioned over and over again by the interviewed subjects in their

²⁹ “Hello, it is the old one/the old lady”.

³⁰ ” Hi, old one/old lady”.

spontaneous remarks about differences between Danes and French, as e.g., by the Danish woman above in these terms:

You have to be very careful about humour, because we have a humour based incredibly much on irony, and that the French do not understand (...) we also have a form of humour where we sort of laugh of ourselves (...), that the French are incapable of (...) (Q: *self-irony?*), no, they don't have that, and we on our side easily become ironic on their behalf, (...), because they are so self-, self-, well not egoistic, but very self-asserting, in some way (Q: *self-important?*), yes, self-important³¹, that we try, you know, all the time not to be (...), irony you have to be very careful about, they don't understand it and they can get incredibly offended (...)

The interviews with the five French subjects confirm that French people often get disconcerted by Danes' use of irony, but also that it can be 'learned'.

4.2 Interviews with French

Of the 5 French subjects (4 women, 1 man), interviewed in Copenhagen, march 2009, 3 worked in private Danish firms, one in an academic institution, one managing her own firm. All, but two, communicated with their Danish interlocutors in English. Four interviews were carried out in French, one in Danish, on the request of the interviewee who had lived 27 years in Denmark.

4.2.1 Examples of humour in Danish professional settings

All five French subjects spontaneously, i.e., without being prompted, mentioned irony as being characteristic of Danish humour. For the four French women, of whom one had lived and worked in Denmark for 27, one for 8 and two for 5 years, Danish irony had been disconcerting at first, but they had taken no offence; living with Danes in private life, they had got used to irony, without finding it funny per se. One, however, a woman in her late twenties, found it surprising that it was so common in her professional life also (translated from French):

I think Danes are very ... ironical in the sense that they can say negative or nasty things to make people laugh without there being anything profound behind. But in France, at least in work situations, those are a type of remark that you would never permit yourselves (...) (Q:

³¹ "Selvhøjtidelig".

How did you react to the irony? Did you understand?) I understood but I think I understood because I lived with a Dane, for which reason I was already acquainted with this type of humour. I was just somewhat surprised that this type of humour is also used in professional life and not only in private life. (...) I told myself that I would never do that.

Another person, a French man in his forties, living in Denmark for 7 years with his French wife and having moved here for professional reasons only, a fact he stressed several times, had experienced severe problems in his interaction with Danes because of their use of irony (translated from French):

I tend to find Danish humour very often repetitive, so that after a certain time, I end up asking myself, hell, is this a joke or is it serious? (...) I feel a little lost, and then, as a consequence, I am not really sure whether we are in the domain of humour or whether we are out of it.

On his own initiative, he told an incident where one of his Danish colleagues met him one morning at 8.15 a.m. at the office with the words (here translated from French, but originally presented in English which was the common language at the office):

“In Denmark people start working at 8 o’clock – although there was no one in the museum, we were practically the only two persons³² – in Denmark you have to meet at 8 o’clock, since, you see, we are in Denmark and we work from early on”.

First the French person took it as a joke, but

it came up so many times with the same person, that after a year, I began getting there at 7.45 (...) Actually, I did not know any longer if it was humour since it was repeated a little too regularly.

Asked whether he recalled another incident, he told the following story, which took place shortly after his arrival in Denmark, when he had trouble getting into evening courses to learn Danish. A colleague of his met him with these words (translated from French, which again was the rendering of the Dane’s wording in English):

³² This comment from the interviewee clearly shows the bringing together of two opposing scripts: 1) everybody meets at 8, and 2) at 8.15 there is no one there.

Anyway, in order to learn Danish, well, there is no choice, you have to divorce and marry a Danish woman.

This remark was taken as a severe offence, explained by the French person in these words (translated from French):

It came up very coldly in a discussion, and as it was at a moment where I tried desperately to learn Danish, it was very hurtful. The big, big danger is that, as you do not understand, because there is a cultural difference, you get paranoid very fast, and yes, I think that I have become paranoid. Now, if somebody makes a joke, I have a tendency to interpret it *first as not being a joke*, and then I start to think about it, well, don't exaggerate, it was probably a case of humour.

This explanation is noteworthy, since it shows that the linguistic shortcut and the saving in psychical expenditure together with a release of energy, did *not* take place, because the listener hesitated as to whether to interpret the words as a *bona-fide* or as a *non-bona-fide* communication. His interpretation took place in several steps, of which only the last, on second thoughts, went in the direction of a *non bona-fide* communication, i.e., of humour, which had of course evaporated by then. Thus, what the Danish speaker probably intended as humour was certainly not received as such by the French interlocutor, an interpretation problem inherent in irony for several reasons.

Described via scripts (cf. Raskin above) or of blending of mental spaces (cf. Fauconnier above), irony consists in presenting a script or a mental space in two forms, an (explicitly) asserted and a (an implicitly) negated form:

Script A + Script A –

Only if the asserted form is interpreted as its own negative counterpart does the act of humour succeed, which is far from being always the case as seen above.³³ Instead of *pleasure*, an act of irony risks creating *discomfort* and *paranoia*. Still, it is a *mediator*, forming new social ties, though of a negative kind. Changing the formula from above about the pleasurable effect of humour we get the formula below for – misinterpreted – irony.

³³ In terms of speech acts, see Raskin 1985: 55 ; Searle 1969.

Irony:

linguistic expression -> bringing together a script in an asserted and a negated form -> accentuating (self)control and censorship -> breaking no taboos -> demanding extra psychological and cognitive effort -> creating discomfort -> forming new social ties – of a negative kind

In the conclusion I shall suggest an explanation for Danes' frequent use of irony, but let us first listen to the Frenchman's own explanation. He imputed his paranoia about Danes' use of irony on an "incompréhension culturelle" and different "bases culturelles", but he also gave an explanation in linguistic, or phonetical, terms:

I understand it as being humour probably only 50% of the time, because it is said with the same intonation. (...) In French, we have a lot of intonation, we have a tendency to stress if it is a joke. In that way, at least, you see it coming. In Danish, the jokes arrive flatly³⁴ in the discussion. There are no forewarning signs³⁵. Once it is out, I need some time to reflect whether it's a joke or what.

I shall propose another explanation in linguistic and social terms below, after having treated the other form of humour often mentioned, play on words.

PLAY ON WORDS IN DANISH PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

Both Danish and French subjects mentioned play on words, i.e., witzes as those exemplified above à la "Galeries Lafaillite", as being typical of French humour. The statement by one of the Danish interviewees that 'French humour is more on plays on words (...) They are really good at it'³⁶, was only corroborated by the French subjects. One of them, a woman in her mid-twenties, said (translated from French):

³⁴ "Platement".

³⁵ "Pas de signes avant-coureurs".

³⁶ "Franskmændenes humor den går mere på sådan ... på ordspil (...) De er faktisk rigtig dygtige til det".

I love play on words (...) my father adores humour, he plays a lot on words (...) I do not master the (Danish) language enough to play on words. (...) Danes use a lot of irony; I only use it a little; actually I am not aware if I use irony.

Asked to tell a situation of humour between them and their Danish colleagues, only one, however, could recall a precise example of play on words: her Danish boss playing with the ambiguity of the Danish word 'gift', which means both 'married' and 'poison':

There is an irony incorporated in the Danish language, in the double meaning of words.

Another example from the same person was the mocking with colleagues about demanding clients, in these terms:

They need it for yesterday.³⁷

In general however, she judged that Danes have less humour than French³⁸ and that irony is not particularly funny.³⁹

Another French interviewee, a woman in her late twenties, proposed by herself an interesting explanation in linguistic terms of why French use play on words more frequently than Danes:

The French language is a little more developed than Danish. We have more words than Danish (...) I remember I was surprised that Danish has so many words that mean several things. I looked it up and saw that Danish has only half as many words as French, I think. That's why, I think, it is easier to play with words in French than in Danish.

Not convinced by this explanation, which might as well induce the opposite tendency with play on words' polysemy, I think the explanation is to be found elsewhere, as shown in section 5 below.

4.2.2 Cultural differences

Asked to describe the Danes in three words, the French interviewees suggested the following characteristics:

- Open, focus on private life, relax

³⁷ Another neat example of blending two mental spaces: 1) clients wanted the job done for yesterday, 2) we haven't delivered (and cannot deliver) yet. »

³⁸ "Les Danois ont moins d'humour".

³⁹ "L'ironie n'est pas superdrôle".

- cosy⁴⁰, individualists, critical
- motivated, efficient, happy
- evasive, bon-vivants, intolerant/critical
- enthusiasts, intellectually honest, arrogant/criticise everybody

While most of these adjectives describe Danes in their professional context in positive terms, the qualifications in terms of ‘evasive’, ‘intolerant’, and ‘critical’ may be related to the lack – in comparison with French – of a courtly rationality with its focus on social norms for conversation and discussion on the one hand, and respect on the other. The description of Danes as being ‘arrogant’ is interesting, as this is an adjective often used by Danes about French...

5. Summing up and explanation

Two types of humour were mentioned again and again as being typical of Danes and French, viz. irony and play on words respectively. I think there are two main reasons for this difference, a linguistic and a sociological explanation, which are however interrelated.

5.1 A linguistic explanation of Danes’ use of irony

In order to approach an understanding in linguistic terms, let us start with the case of Danish irony presented, according to the French listener, bluntly with no forewarning signals in these words in English (repeated here in my translation from French):

Anyway, in order to learn Danish, well, there is no choice, you have to divorce and marry a Danish woman.

Without knowing the exact English wording of the Danish speaker, who communicated as his French interlocutor in a third language, foreign to both of them,⁴¹ let us imagine and examine how the remark may have been put in Danish, with the characteristics of this language:

⁴⁰ Proposed in Danish by the term ‘hyggelig’.

⁴¹ This example of an unsuccessful act of humour shows the limitations for a *lingua franca* user to express feelings and emotions adequately.

Så må du *jo hellere* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

Så må du *vel hellere* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

Så må du *nok hellere* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

Så må du *jo bare* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

Så må du *vel bare* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

Så må du *nok bare* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

Så må du *jo nok hellere bare* lade dig skille og gifte dig med en dansker

'Then you have *only better/supposedly better* divorce and marry a Dane'⁴²

It is reasonable to suppose that the remark in Danish would have contained a set of bonding particles,⁴³ which would have created a context of presupposed intimacy, signalling that the remark should be taken for a *non bona-fide* communication, containing no threat, neither personal nor social. All languages have such 'pragmatic' particles, also French, as e.g. *enfin, alors, finalement, je pense, vous savez, si vous voulez*, etc. The characteristic of the Danish particles, however, is that they are short, they consist of condensed linguistic material, which explains why they are widely used. Furthermore, the short form together with an often flat intonation, makes these bonding particles less audible to a foreign ear, for which reason they may easily escape foreign interlocutors.

In the re-formulations above, the bonding particles introduce *different voices*, one of which asserts the content of the sentence, while the other negates it; one which signals a *bona fide* communication, the other a *non bona fide*. In linguistic terms, irony is an instance of 'polysemy', i.e., the presence of several voices,⁴⁴ and it would certainly be of interest to ask why Danes show such a penchant for speaking with two voices. What is the point of stating and negating a state-of-

⁴² These adverbials are close to impossible to translate.

⁴³ The semantic and pragmatic subtleties of the different expressions will be the topic of a later paper.

⁴⁴ For polyphony in Danish see Durst-Andersen 2007.

affairs at the same time? Of blurring the borders between *bona fide* and *non bona fide* communication? The best solution I can come up with for now, is the description ‘evasive’ proposed by one of the French interviewees, which in a comparative perspective may be due to there being no tradition in Denmark for conversational culture with linguistic clarity and social respect.

5.2 A sociological explanation of Danes’ use of irony

Another social explanation of Danes’ common use of irony may be found in the horizontal organisation of the Danish society with its political culture of consensus and corporatism (Kaspersen 2008: 112). In such a social organisation, irony is probably less threatening for the face of the interlocutor than in a vertical society with a more rigid hierarchical organisation. This is even truer for the widespread use among Danes of self-deprecating humour, so-called ‘self-irony’. In a horizontal societal organisation with the use of self-irony presenting a smaller risk of being taken for an instance of *bona-fide communication* of self-depreciation, people feel enough secure to diminish themselves, their interlocutor or a third person, without it being perceived as *bona-fide communication*.⁴⁵ Or, as put by Steven Pinker:

One way to signal to a companion that the basis for a relationship is friendship rather than dominance is to call attention to an undignified trait in yourself or in the companion, disavowing the possibility that one of you has something to lord over the other. (Pinker 2007: 408.)

In a hierarchic, vertical societal organisation, people will be keener on distinguishing themselves and their social status from others in self-appreciating terms (“parade their status”, see Elias above). This may also explain why French people seem to prefer humour in the form of *play on words*. Puns and plays on words are part of the stylistic conventions and forms of social intercourse characteristic of French society, with its focus on conversation and articulateness of language. Another reason may be that the butt of a pun is neither the sender nor the receiver, but a 3rd person in the form of language itself.

⁴⁵ Compare to Jewish self-disparaging humour, “the ability to laugh humorously at oneself”, which is “evidence of the mental act of rising above one’s deficiencies by frankly admitting and enjoying them”, Raskin 1985: 22).

The characteristic difference by Danes and French was brought out by two of the interviewees. One, a Danish woman in her forties, stated it in these terms:

Danes may have a false ... modesty, whereas the French do not hesitate to promote themselves ... a conflict can easily arise there ... at the humoristic level, for instance, where a Dane would say “well I am more or less OK at skiing”, the French person would say “Well I am not exactly the world champion in France, but I am rather good.” He would orient it in a humorous way, up-wards, whereas the Dane would orient it down-wards.

Another interviewee, a French man in his forties, made an almost identical observation:

In France, we love to show ourselves to our advantage, in Denmark, that does not work. This entails that the situation is inversed, Danes show a tendency to put the person in front of you in an inferior position, because you can not put yourself in a superior position. (...) In France, we love to increase our own standing, it is really part of the culture, and nobody takes it seriously

Both mentioned the (in)famous Danish “Janteloven”, the Danish interviewee by referring to a French professor in Denmark,⁴⁶ the French by signalling explicitly that he had been told about this in his Danish class. Although this meta-knowledge somewhat messes up the intuitiveness of interviewees’ observations, they still hold true.

The constant upgrading noticed as “typical French” received a sociological explanation by the French interviewee quoted above:

There is a veritable arrogance among French people, after all, we have an elitist school system, YOU are the elite of France, YOU are the best ... so, no wonder, even abroad we are the best (...) in Denmark the situation is precisely the opposite...

In linguistic terms, we can describe the differences noticed above in *scales*, in upward- and downward-oriented scales. In French “argumentative linguistics” (Anscombre & Ducrot 1983), linguistic expressions and utterances do not only contain information, but also argumentation, as exemplified below, where the different continuations reveal that the first sentence of each example contains an “argumentative direction” pointing upward towards a positive result (i) or pointing downwards towards a negative result (iii) (* marks odd continuation):

⁴⁶ Dominique Bouchet, Ålborg University.

- i. I have almost finished my thesis. I can deliver soon.
- ii. *I have almost finished my thesis. I cannot deliver soon.
- iii. I have not yet finished my thesis. I cannot deliver soon.
- iv. *I have not yet finished my thesis. I can deliver soon.

Within this argumentative framework (see also Jarvella & Lundquist 1995) it is plausible to believe that Danes would be more inclined to use downward particles – such as *only*, *less than*, *half empty* and the like – whereas French would use upward pointing particles such as *almost*, *more than*, *half full*, etc. A comparative study in this direction will follow on a later occasion.

6. Conclusion

The observations made during the interviews by the Danish and French subjects do not, as a whole, substantiate the hypothesis presented in the beginning of this paper, to the effect that “humour can neutralise linguistic and cultural barriers and create a shared world”. Only one of the narrated incidents of acts of humour, the *lapsus linguae*, i.e. the involuntary – and innocuous – play on words by the Danish furniture seller, confirmed this hypothesis solidly. Rather to the contrary, the frequent use of irony among Danes caused general discomfort among their French interlocutors, thus *blocking* and *forbidding* rather than *permitting* and *affording* the creation of new social ties (Latour, see above). Humour was still a mediator, but in a negative sense.

It seems plausible, however, to assume that the general satisfaction that the French interviewees (except one) expressed with their working situation in Denmark can be imputed to the prevailing relax, open, motivated, efficient and happy⁴⁷ atmosphere, in which irony seems to thrive, and which seems to be the condition for an ironic act of humour to be taken as a *non-bona-fide* communication.

Rounding up on a prescriptive note, the advice could be for Danes to be careful in their use of irony, for French to be aware of this specific form of Danish humour, and for both not

⁴⁷ All adjectives prompted by the question “Describe the Danes in three words (especially as far as the working situation is concerned)”.

to be afraid of making language errors in the foreign language, as these may really enhance the creation of new social shapes and ties.

7. Perspectives

As the interviews present mines of information, more digging out and reconstruction should be done, just as several questions need to be investigated. On the one hand, more thorough linguistic analyses need to be carried out in order to buttress the imputed relation between language and mentality and culture; on the other, the interviewees themselves quite spontaneously provided precious insight into significant differences in work cultures in the two countries. All this will be treated in up-coming papers.

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