

Nordic Humour

A Question of Humour Socialisation?

Lundquist, Lita Sander

Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Nordlit

DOI:
[10.7557/13.6975](https://doi.org/10.7557/13.6975)

Publication date:
2023

License
CC BY

Citation for published version (APA):
Lundquist, L. S. (2023). Nordic Humour: A Question of Humour Socialisation? *Nordlit*, 51(2).
<https://doi.org/10.7557/13.6975>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 21. Jun. 2024



NORDIC HUMOUR – A QUESTION OF HUMOUR SOCIALISATION?

Lita Lundquist (Copenhagen Business School)

Resumé

Inspireret af og med eksempler fra Lars von Trier's opus Riget Exodus (2022) søger jeg med begrebet humorsocialisering fra min tidligere humorforskning at indkredse hvad Nordisk humor kunne være. Med en mini-undersøgelse sætter jeg fokus på ligheder og forskelle mellem dansk og svensk (og norsk) humor, som jeg forklarer med ligheder og forskelle mellem vores sprog og vores samfund. En vigtig brik til at forstå vores forskellige form for og brug af humor ligger i forskellen i national mentalitet, der for Danmarks og Sveriges vedkommende kan beskrives som henholdsvis en dansk lejrbaalsmentalitet overfor en svensk folkhemsmentalitet.

Nøgleord

Spontan samtalehumor, national mentalitet og humor, Den Store Humor, humorsocialisering.

Abstract

Starting from my former empirical studies but supplemented with fresh fictional “data” from Lars von Trier's latest TV series Riget Exodus (2022), I first describe how Danes use humour in very characteristic ways, also in cross-cultural professional settings. Next, I explain not only Danish humour but all national humour with the notion of humour socialisation, which integrates and combines national humour with the national language on the one hand, and the specific national process of civilisation on the other hand. Moving to Nordic humour, I focus on how Danes and Swedes perceive each other's humour, and then explain divergences between the humour of these two Nordic countries. These differences, I conclude, are the result mainly of differences in their respective civilising processes, while I am waiting and hoping for deeper comparative linguistic studies of the use of ‘humour warning signals’ in Danish and Swedish.

Keywords

Spontaneous conversational humour, national mentality and humour, Big Humour, humour socialization.

Jag har fått berättat för mig att relationen mellan danskar och svenskar kan vara lite lätt ansträngd, och då kom jag på det att jag skulle skratta mycket som danskarna själva gör helt omotiverat i tid och otid./I have been told that the relationship between Danes and Swedes can be a bit tense, so I had the idea that I should laugh a lot, just like the Danes do all the time for no obvious reason.

– Dr Helmer Jr in *Riget Exodus*

Så kald os dog til orden, store broderland, for vores drilleri, men har vi ikke netop en plads på grænsen mellem granit og kalk. Mellem stort og småt, mellem bjerg og dal, mellem klogt og plat. Mellem store og lille bror./So why not call us back to order, great brother-land, for our banter. But to be honest, don't we just have a place on the border between granite and limestone, between big and small, between mountain and valley, between wisdom and commonplace. Between big brother and baby brother.

– Lars von Trier in *Riget Exodus*

Introduction

In the past few years, the world of Nordic humour has been blessed with another round of wry humour and harsh satire from the ingenious Danish film director Lars von Trier. In his new, and third, series of *Riget: Exodus* (the first two aired in 1994 and 1997), he pinpoints from the very start Danes' and Swedes' views of each other's humour, society and mentality. Despite the wild exaggerations and parodic absurdities, the fictional characters and the indeed farcical intrigue at the neurosurgical ward at *Riget*¹ (The Kingdom) highlight distinguishing features of Danish humour that have been in focus in earlier humour studies (Lundquist 2013, 2014). This research led me to the notion of *humour socialisation* which is, as I hope to show here, generalisable to humour in other countries, thus adding a wider analytical scope to the study of national humour (Lundquist 2020, 2021; Lundquist and Dyrbye 2023).

With crazy humour that, in itself, reveals important aspects of Danish humour, Lars von Trier with great success puts his satirical finger on soft spots of and stark differences between Danish and Swedish mentality, as illustrated by the quotes above, the first about a difference in the use of humour, the second about the big brother versus baby brother mentality and relationship between the two countries. I shall link these two topics, use of humour and national mentality, and then, on a more serious note and using notions established on findings from my research in recent years on Danes' use of humour in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic working situations, approach the topic of national – and Nordic – humour.

While trying to make the two worlds meet, integrating dialogues and scenes from the wildly fictitious drama of *Riget Exodus* with stringent humour studies, I shall move toward comparing Danes' use of humour at the workplace to that of Swedes and – to a lesser degree – to that of Norwegians.

Danes' use of spontaneous verbal humour in international work situations

Lars von Trier already served as “a springboard for explaining why Danes using humour often dive head-first into provocative, confrontational and offensive waters, causing an instantly brittle reception” (Lundquist and Dyrbye 2023, 15). Indeed, at the ill-famed press conference at the Cannes film festival in 2011, he made, unintentionally I suppose, some quite spectacular personal blunders while trying to use humour in a professional

¹ Nickname for Denmark's National Hospital, *Rigshospitalet*.

context (Lundquist 2020, 13–15). Relying on typical Danish wit, with its web of presupposed shared knowledge referred to in an undercover way – here also including very private matters – he expressed horrible views on Hitler and the Nazis, succeeded in offending almost everyone in the audience, was expelled from the festival as a *persona non grata*, and caused an immediate total breakdown of the publicity for his film. An ominous example of what spontaneous use of instinctive, “innate” humour across national borders and languages in serious business contexts can bring.

In the incident mentioned above, Lars von Trier, intending to sell his film *Melancholia* with his own and very unsuccessful use of humour in a crucial professional moment, demonstrated characteristic features of Danish humour. In his latest *oeuvre Riget*, it is in the role of film director, as “The Director of it all”², that he very deliberately stages wild scenes of Danes and Swedes confronting each other’s national mentality, strangeness – and humour.

Typical Danish humour

In fact, Dr Helmer Jr, the prestigious son of the former, equally important and highly respectable Dr Helmer Sr, is with typical Danish degrading wit rebaptised Dr Halmer, since, as his Danish partner, chief physician Pontopidan, good naturedly explains: “if your father, whom we have all heard so much about, was Helmer, as his son you must be Halmer”³. Dr Helmer Jr was quite right when in referring to Danes he made the observation above that he “should laugh a lot, just like the Danes do all the time for no obvious reason.”⁴

Empirical studies (Lundquist 2020, 2021) have confirmed that, to a large degree, Doctor Helmer’s judgement of Danish humour was spot on. One of the interviewees in an investigation, a young Bulgarian woman working at a Danish company, is of the same opinion: “Some (Danish) people joke or try to joke about everything. Sometimes I don’t know if people are joking or not, because they do it with everything, so sometimes I think that a serious statement is a joke.” In fact, she doesn’t find Danish humour funny at all. On the contrary, she gets irritated and frustrated, because “when my boss jokes with me, I can get confused, because I don’t know if I can return the joke or just smile” (Lundquist 2020, 161). Instead of softening the workplace atmosphere and creating positive bonds between colleagues, as humour at the workplace in the best of cases is meant to do⁵, the result of unsuccessful humour events is rather the opposite: feelings of surprise and bewilderment. And in the worst cases, even *traumatising* non-Danes exposed to Danish wittiness, as in this revealing story by a French scientist in his forties working at a Danish university, who had relocated to Denmark with his wife seven years earlier. He was

² *Direktøren for det hele*, another hilarious film from Lars von Trier, provides an entertaining glimpse of the many paradoxes of the Danes’ conflict-avoiding humour in professional contexts.

³ With a silly and quite witless play on words: “hel-” (whole) to “hal(v)-” (half).

⁴ English translations are from the series’ subtitles (which for some odd reason vary between Danish and Swedish channels).

⁵ As convincingly shown both in the “encryption theory of humour” (Flamson and Barrett 2008, 2013) and in the so-called AAA-model, where the As refer to Assortment, Affiliation and Altruism (Curry and Dunbar 2013, 337). See also Lundquist 2020, 149–152.

clearly frustrated by the severe problems he experienced when interacting with Danes at work because of their use of humour:

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.

He related one particular incident that took place at work a while after he arrived in Denmark. When one of his colleagues asked why he had not yet learned to speak Danish, he explained that he was having trouble getting into evening classes to learn the language. Quick as a flash, the Danish colleague quipped in English: “Anyway, when learning Danish, there’s no choice. You should get a divorce and marry a Danish woman.” This remark caused severe offence, explained by the Frenchman as follows:

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

Sadly, the Frenchman took the remark that the deadpan Danish speaker probably intended as humour, seriously. Unaware of the Danish “wisdom”, which his Danish colleague was only echoing, about learning foreign languages via pillow talk, he not only perceived the remark as an intrusion into his private life and attack on his private persona, but he felt it was a threat to his professional pride and status.

This incident reveals other particularities of Danes’ use of humour at the workplace, which Dr Helmer Jr also has to struggle with: Danes do not hesitate to refer to private life and blend it into their professional life, which is ill received in most other working cultures. They also often refer to “general wisdoms” with irony and self-irony, i.e., they *echo* and *pretend*⁶ to subscribe to such wisdoms, while in reality distorting and taking an ironic distance to them. Danes can easily mark ironic distances in their own language, which offers them a whole array of small subtle linguistic markers, “conversational” or “dialogical particles” (Hansen and Heltoft 2011, 1046–1108), such as *jo*, *da*, *vist*, *nok*, *vel*, *nu*, which, with intricate webs of subtle meaning potentials, tell listeners to search in their background knowledge and in the situational context to figure out the intended meaning on their own. It is natural and easy to imagine that the Dane, had he spoken his native tongue, would have inserted one or more of these linguistic signals, thus telling everyone to “take this with a grain of salt”:

⁶ Irony and self-irony have been explained (Lundquist 2020, 58–69, 87–90) with the theories of irony as *echo* (Sperber and Wilson 1981) and as *pretense* (Clark and Gerrig 1984).

Then you had *jo/ nok/ vel/ vist/ jo nok/ vel nok/ vist nok/...* better divorce and marry a Danish woman.

The last particularity about Danes' conversational humour in professional contexts to be mentioned here is that it is often experienced as impolite and inconsiderate, and even rude, aggressive, inappropriate and hurtful.

Dr Helmer Jr has an excruciating experience in this direction, once again with his Danish secretary at *Riget*. The dialogue between the rather self-pompous Swedish doctor and the neutral and uncommitted, and perhaps in the eyes of Dr Helmer nonchalant and disrespectful Danish secretary is as follows⁷:

- Doctor Helmer: Goddag, mitt namn är Helmer, nyttillträdd professor. Äldsta son till framlidna Stig G. Helmer./Good morning. My name is Helmer, the newly appointed professor. Eldest son of the late Stig G. Helmer.
- Danish secretary: Jeg genkendte jo med det samme navnet da jeg så det på pakkerne⁸. Jeg har spekuleret som en sindssyg på, hvad står egentlig G'et for i Deres fars navn?/Of course I recognised at once the name when I saw it on the packages. I was wondering like hell what does the G in your father's name stand for?
- Swedish Doctor: Min fars namn var Stig Gustav Helmer. Gustav efter Kúng⁹ Gustav Vasa./My father's name was Stig Gustav Helmer. Gustav from Kíng Gustav Vasa.
- Danish secretary: Jaha./Yes.
- Swedish Doctor: Kristian Tyrann och allt det där./Christian the Tyrant and all that. (FORCED SMILE)
- Danish secretary: Ja, ja. I Danmark, der tror jeg kun vi husker Gustav Vasa fordi han indførte gløggen./In Denmark we only remember Gustav Vasa for introducing mulled wine.
- Swedish Doctor: Ursäkta mig, men som medarbetare med svenskt ursprung. Denna hatiska inställningen till mitt land... Jag ser ju på era läppar att ni knappt kunde undanhålla er från jämförelsen med skeppet Vasa som sjönk på sin jungfrufärd på grund av ett mindre tekniskt fel./Excuse me, but being a colleague of Swedish origin. That hateful attitude toward my country, I can read it on your lips, that you were close to making the comparison with the Vasa ship that sank on its maiden voyage due to a minor technical fault.
- Danish secretary: ”Mindre teknisk fejl”? Der var jo tale om at det underste kanondæk lå under vandlinjen og jomfrurejsen som De nævner der, den blev på et par meter/“A minor technical fault”? The lower cannon deck

⁷ Regrettably, written words cannot do justice to the delightful facial and non-verbal humour delivered by the exquisite actors such as, in this scene, Mikael Persbrandt and Birthe Neumann.

⁸ Flatpacks from IKEA.

⁹ With emphatic stress on “Kung”.

was under the water line, and the maiden voyage lasted only a few meters.

The, in Danish eyes, self-important Swedish doctor might sense a Danish lack of respect from a subordinate employee to the superordinate, especially as he had just made a majestic roof-top landing on *Riget* in a Swedish helicopter, greeting his new working environment with these words: “Gläd er danskar. Vi har med oss en av Sveriges bästa läkare. (SALUTING) Take me to your leader”/, “Danes, we have one of Sweden’s best doctors on board. (SALUTING) Take me to your leader”.

This grandiose arrival certainly contrasts sharply with that of the Danish Administrative Chief Physician Pontopidan, with whom Dr Helmer-Halmer has to share responsibility for neurosurgery. In spite of his position as a leader, Pontopidan reaches his workplace more modestly by bike, with a child seat behind him, a helmet on his head, a backpack, meticulously locking his bike to a lamppost. A contrast that culminates when the two first meet in the corridor, with Danish Pontopidan strolling in a relaxed manner down the corridor, humming *hyggelige* lines from a Danish children’s song: “Godmorgen, Godmorgen, til hele bondegården”/ “Good morning, good morning to the whole farm”, and then for quite some time tenderly hugging and cuddling his newly appointed Swedish professor partner, who reacts to this physical intimacy with “Vem fan var den böjäveln?”/ “Who was that gay bastard?” The Swedish big brother mentality is then exposed in his remark to the solitaire-playing medical director of *Riget*:

Om jag fick tillåta mig, som en man från ett stort land till en man från ett litet land, så är grundregeln för patiens att man lägger svart på rött och vice versa.

If I may, being a man from a big country talking to a man from a small country, the basic rule of playing solitaire is to place a black card on top of a red card, and vice versa.

He perseveres, e.g., here in his first meeting with the Danish staff with this arrogant and hence ill-received remark:

Jag var tvungen att komma till landet som gjorde far sinnessjuk, för att om möjligen (...) fullända pappas mission om att höja den danska standarden. Om än inte till svensk nivå. Så långt sträcker sig ingen vit mans krafter.

I had to come to the country that made my father insane, to if possible (...) complete my dad’s mission to raise the Danish standard. Though not close to a Swedish level. No white man’s strength can reach that far.

National humour

With these examples, and a fair amount of empirical data (Lundquist 2020, 183–190) in hand, let us try to explain why Danes use humour as they do, often with irony and self-irony. Earlier research has confronted Danes’ use of humour with that of French people, focusing on the *spontaneous use of humour in professional cross-cultural settings and work situations*, i.e., the impromptu appearance of humour in otherwise serious

conversations, discussions and negotiations (Lundquist 2010, 2013, 2014). The fictitious world of *Riget Exodus* is happily enough for our purpose here also restricted to a definite *work setting*, namely meeting and operation rooms, together with the corridors and lifts and more spooky surroundings up and down the vast building. *Riget Exodus* is indeed an ingenious satire on the peculiarities of Danish working culture¹⁰, which are radically incongruent with those of other cultures, as summarised in the table below (Lundquist and Dyrbye 2023, 55):

← Danes	Non-Danes →
Non-authority	Authority
Informality	Formality
Familiarity	Distance
Private persona	Professional persona
Humorous attitude permitted	Serious attitude recommended

Table 1: Working culture incongruity between Danes and non-Danes.

My rather naïve working hypothesis when first comparing Danes and French people’s use of humour in working contexts was that humour would act as a positive “mediator” in interaction between these two otherwise culturally very different groups. Technically, the result of a mediator is that “lots of *surprising aliens* may pop up” with ensuing new, emergent relations into which the participants are “reshuffled together” (Latour 2005, 58–59). When the new rapport mediated by humour is characterised by a feeling of amusement and wellbeing, it is a *positive social mediator* that may fuel and strengthen positive business relationships. In contrast, when humour creates an atmosphere of misunderstanding and frustration, it acts as a *negative social mediator*. In *Riget Exodus*, despite the deliberate and self-imposed effort of the Swedish Doctor Helmer to comply with the allegedly compulsory funniness of Danes, Danish humour more often than not, and sadly enough, acts mainly as a negative mediator, leading to considerable vexation and infuriation plaguing future cooperation.

The results from my first investigation were confirmed by interviewees from 14 other countries¹¹ who perceived Danes’ use of humour in professional contexts as “in your face”, “blunt”, “direct”, “hurtful”, and even “traumatising”, as we saw above. All descriptions used by the non-Danish interviewees pointed toward the same features of Danes’ use of humour, as being *rude* and *crude* – and excluding – whereas the Danes judged themselves to be innocently and harmlessly *ironic* and *self-ironic* – in fact, as friendly and including.

In turn, the Danes interviewed often found that the French are arrogant, Germans and Swedes are boring, Italians are wacky, etc. – general descriptions that lead us toward the conception of *national humour*, a notion that has been debated at length in humour

¹⁰ Enjoy the hilarious scenes from the neurosurgical workplace at <https://viaplay.dk/serier/riget-exodus> (December 2022).

¹¹ These interviewees represented different working settings: politicians, namely Danish, French and German members of the European Parliament. And later, international students from CBS. The following nationalities were represented here: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Latvia, Serbia, Singapore, Spain, Sweden and USA.

studies. One example is Avner Ziv, who, in an inspiring book on “national styles of humour” compares humour in Australia, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, USA and Yugoslavia (Ziv 1988). In his introduction, Ziv makes an interesting distinction between *universal* and *national* aspects of humour, stressing the role of *language* and *history*, as we will also do here, along these lines (Ziv 1988, x–xi):

- The universal aspect of humour: “Humor is a way of expressing human needs in a socially accepted manner”
- The national aspect: “Because humor reflects a nation’s life, differences among national forms of humor can be expected”
- The role of language and history: “Languages differ, but history and tradition also create differences”

Clearly, one must handle the idea of national humour with care and precaution, as it easily lends itself to national stereotypes and cultural clichés. However, intrigued by the consensus between my non-Danish interviewees as to the strangeness of Danes’ use of humour in professional contexts, I wanted to explain why Danes’ humour often acts as a negative social mediator. I searched for a systematic explanation that does not stop at the rather vague overarching term cultural differences but digs deeper.

Explaining national humour

Ploughing my way through a considerable amount of literature to explain differences in national humour, I saw an interesting intersection, for my purposes, between certain trends within *humour studies*, *linguistics* and *sociology*. From these three disciplines I dug up ideas and notions that share a *dynamic dimension* and help explain why people growing up in the same country and speaking the same mother tongue are inclined to use humour in specific but for them shared ways compared to other nationalities.

Within humour studies I was inspired first and foremost by the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding (1843–1931) and his fascinating book from 1916 *Den Store Humor* (“The Big (or Great) Humour”). Høffding presents very interesting *evolutionary aspects* of how a person’s humour habitus is formed during their upbringing. Each person is “bred” with humour specific to their social community and ends up entertaining a specific attitude to humour. This is what Høffding calls “The Big Humour”. Thus, a person’s big humour gradually builds up during his or her lifetime. First, in childhood, surrounded by parents and siblings, the child experiences humour in the form of small playful episodes that stir pleasant emotions of comfort, amusement and well-being, which Høffding refers to as “den lille-bitte humor” (“teeny-weeny humour”). Our upbringing continues during adolescence as we join various social groups, such as school, education, workplaces, clubs, etc. Here, we meet new humour experiences, and are kitted out with our “lille humor” (“little humour”) where we experience that by using humour ourselves, we help to keep our group’s spirits high and join in with relaxing the ambience. We feel that others in the group value us, find us likeable and that we belong. In the end, all our experiences with tiny and little humour combine to create our big humour, which, according to

Høffding, is not only an attitude to humour but a general attitude to life (Lundquist 2021, 40).

Within sociology, the dynamic aspect is found in the so-called historical sociology initiated and developed by the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990), who showed how a *national mentality* is gradually “moulded” by geo-historical-political circumstances specific for a nation, a historical process which Elias subsumed in the notion “the civilising process” (or “process of civilisation” [Elias and Mennell 2006]). The civilising process of a given nation is founded on and generated by particular historical circumstances that vary radically from country to country, leading to a particular “national mentality”. Elias convincingly demonstrated this by referring to the French court society: “... the specific and distinctive 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” (Elias 1994, 30).

Elias provides a sophisticated method that is also useful for addressing in a more systematic way the notion of national humour, i.e., a population’s *collective “big humour”*, as having been moulded by a specific historical process.

Within linguistics, we find dynamic aspects in theories concerned with how utterances in conversations are produced and interpreted in an ongoing process. Our focus here is on Paul Grice’s seminal article on “Logic and Conversation” (Grice 1989) and his general *principle of cooperation*, which is fundamental for understanding all conversation and human interaction, with conversational humour included. This principle states that a “logic of conversation” exists by which all partners in a conversation *cooperate* by contributing remarks to produce coherence, and by doing their utmost to make sense out of what their conversational partner just said because they expect everyone to stick to this cooperative principle.

Though Grice considered this to be a general principle, it may not be as general as all that, since many non-Danes have difficulty, as we saw, making sense out of Danes’ abrupt, apparently out-of-order remarks in work contexts. Their confusion can, in my view, be attributed to the fact that not all nationalities are moulded, as the Danes, to expect funny remarks in otherwise sober and goal-oriented serious professional conversations. Staying on the linguistic note, as it turns out, Danish – and other Nordic (and Germanic) languages – has a special array of small linguistic markers that signal for the listener to be aware of dialogical meaning potential, i.e., implicatures warning of undercover meanings hidden between the lines, often to the effect of a non-serious, humorous interpretation (see below).

Ideas derived from humour studies, sociology and linguistics have been subsumed and combined in the notion of *humour socialisation* (Lundquist 2020, 2021) defined in these terms:

Humour socialisation describes the fact that a person’s attitude to and use of humour has been formed by the language they learned and spoke as a mother tongue and by the society where they grew up.

I believe that with this notion we are now ready to also address the topic of Nordic humour in a methodical way.

Danes' humour socialisation

Danes seem, according to interviews and questionnaires, inclined to use humour in the forms of irony and self-irony, fuelled by the small bonding particles of the Danish language that escape non-Danes' ears and lead to their experience of Danish humour as being rude and crude, and Danes as being direct and impolite. For example, in this story (Lundquist 2020, 23; Lundquist and Dyrbye 2023) a Chinese student taking international studies at Copenhagen Business School described how he offered up to his Danish buddy this initial congenial and contact-seeking remark: "I have heard that the Danes are the happiest people in the world." The Dane's response was prompt: "That's because of excessive use of alcohol and sex." The young Chinese student later described his own reaction in these terms: "I was very surprised. I would have preferred a more discreet and restrained form of humour. (...) Maybe because I am from a country with a tradition for censorship and reserve." Had the Dane spoken his mother tongue, he would most likely have used one of the small conversational particles, in order to signal an ironic and even self-ironic distancing:

That's [*jo, nok, vel, vist, vist nok, vel nok, jo nok...*] because of our excessive use of alcohol and sex!

By using these intimacy-creating, conversational and "bonding" particles (Lundquist 2020, 97), the Dane would at the same time have tried, though no doubt unsuccessfully, to let the foreigner into the tightly knit group of Danes. Indeed, seen from the perspective of civilising, throughout history, Danes have been moulded from below from a peasant society by their specific process of civilisation into a national mentality based on (relative) equality, with horizontal organisation in all social groups, characterised by a direct, informal social intercourse, in private as in professional life, not caring much for polite, elegant or subtle social norms and conventions. The historical-political constraints that led Denmark to become a non-hierarchical society based on political consensus and general social trust have – by historians and sociologists – been traced back to Denmark's military defeat to Germany in 1864 and the 2/3 reduction across the 19th century of its territories (Jespersen 2004; Østergaard 2006). Danish political parties and other social players were forced to agree on radical reforms in order to "survive as a national unit" (Kaspersen 2008, 244, quoted in Lundquist 2020, 139–141). This meant accepting compromises and agreements, all of which led Denmark to become a primarily consensual society based on trust and evolving in the direction of a welfare society. The Danish mentality that emerged from this civilising process has often been described as a tribe mentality (Mellon 1992), and even better a campfire mentality, as suggested in (Jespersen 2004) and adopted by (Lundquist 2020, 141–145):

The particularly Danish solidarity based on a tribal feeling (...) could perhaps better be compared to *a campfire*. All the members of the company assemble

shoulder to shoulder around it, with their backs to the darkness outside the circle of light from the fire, and *warm themselves with feelings of security and comradeship* and the heat from the large communal bonfire. (...) There is no sense of an “us and you” feeling, but of an *introverted “us-us” mentality*. (Jespersen 2004, 209)

The campfire metaphor fits hand in glove with Danes’ preferred forms of humour, irony and self-irony, two forms of humour that are also prevalent in Danes’ self-evaluation of their national humour. This is true to an extent that *irony* and *self-irony* can be considered “cultural keywords” in Danish, defined as “culturally salient and frequent words (guiding to) salient patterns of habitual thinking” (Levisen 2012, 79). Indeed, Dr Helmer-Halmer was on the right track when he felt obliged to join in Danes’ ubiquitous – and for others highly unmotivated and disturbing – laughing and smiling. In the comfortable *hyggelig* cosy social setting of the campfire, there is no danger in firing off quick ironic or self-ironic comments, as irony and self-irony are used with absolute social trust, everybody around the campfire agreeing that it is better not to stick out or draw attention to your special talents or merits. That is certainly a point *not* taken by the conceited and big-headed Swedish professor Helmer.

It is in this campfire ambience and mentality that infant Danes have their first experience with Danish teeny-weeny humour, babbling with parents and siblings in their mother tongue with its treasure of bonding words. These are sort of *embodied* in Danes from early childhood and often tightly linked to their first episodes with humour. And supplemented with “little humour” they end up with their “big humour” as instinctive, automatic responses in verbal interaction.

Nordic humour – the same process of humour socialisation?

Having settled the framework of humour socialisation as a means for explaining why a national humour may show certain tendencies, preferences and taboos, gos and no-gos for the use of humour in international interactions (Lundquist and Gravier 2019), let me approach the question of Nordic Humour. Can we talk about a kind of regional humour encompassing several countries that share certain aspects of their attitude to humour? Countries who, in Høffding’s words, have approximately *the same big humour*? Would the population of the Nordic countries have been subjected to the same process of civilisation?

I shall limit the five Nordic countries and the autonomous territories and regions to Denmark, Norway and Sweden. So, the question is: Have Danes, Norwegians and Swedes been socialised in a similar way into the same type of big humour, into the same attitude and use of humour? The intuitive answer that first comes to mind, to my mind at least, is “Yes”, since these countries have much in common in their way of life, language, history, religion and social structure.

First, with respect to language. Danish, Swedish and Norwegian belong to the same Nordic branch of the Germanic language family; the three languages are typologically the same but with certain variances, of course, in how they use similar language structures

and expressions. The three languages are considered mutually intelligible, but what about humour expressed in these languages, will it also be mutually understandable?

What is very important when it comes to using humour, both in verbalising and comprehending, is the existence in all three languages of the small conversational particles that we saw play a crucial role as humour warning signals in Danes' spontaneous verbal humour. However, perhaps Norwegians and Swedes do not use these small words in the same way and with the same effect as Danes. We will have to test whether there are similarities or differences in the frequencies of using these small words across the three national languages and see whether they also function as humour warning expressions in Norwegian and Swedish. This seems to me to be a perfect topic for further research.

Considering the second important aspect of humour socialisation, society, the three countries in question certainly have a lot in common on many parameters. Especially when it comes to the social organisation of our present societies – e.g., with respect to welfare states founded on trust and equality, political consensus seeking, conflict avoidance and cooperation, low levels of corruption and so forth. We are also very close on parameters such as religion, education, way and quality of life, etc. However, although we share aspects of the Nordic model of economy and social structure, each of the three countries has its own economic and social model, sometimes with considerable differences to its neighbours. This is due to divergences in our histories and geo-economic-political circumstances. Without entering into these historical details, we can conclude with the words of Norbert Elias that the three countries have not undergone the same *process of civilisation*. Will this influence the social norms of humour used in the three countries in general and in professional relationships in particular? Might we expect there to be more differences than similarities?

Facts: A short enquiry into Swedish and Norwegian experiences of Danish humour

I have not delved deeper into these questions yet. However, a mini-empirical study with four testimonies from acquaintances in Norway and Sweden has shed some light on how they evaluate their experience of Danish colleagues and their use of humour in professional contexts. Both sets of answers are quite illustrative and instructive as shown here by one representative of each nationality, with respect to what they perceive as similarities and differences between their national humour and that of Danes, as summarised in table 2.¹²

Questions	Norwegian CEO Working with Danish – and other Nordic – managers, consultants and colleagues in offshore, naval, metals and energy industries.	Swedish university professor Working at a Copenhagen university for three and a half years.
Experiences?	Jeg opplevet danskene som vennlige og svært veloppdragne	Det som tydeligast framträder är danskars påtagliga direktthet i

¹² Main points translated in the explanation below the table.

	uten at de fremsto som spesielt ironiske ... De var enkle å omgås, kom fort til saken og virket velutdannede og svært profesjonelle med en vennlig tone med fokus på å gjøre en god jobb. (...) tonen var rund og inkluderende, behagelig. (...) De gir ikke inntrykk av å ta seg selv så veldig høytidelig, men opprettholder verdighet.	jämförelse med dominerande svenska samtalsvanor. En direktet som av svenskar kan uppfattas som närgångenhet och som oftast inbegriper någon form av humor, särskilt i form av sarkasm eller ironi.
Differences?	Jeg mener danskene mer klarer å være vennlige og inkluderende men samtidig holde på formene og opprettholde sin verdighet, mens nordmennene lettere «dummer seg ut» og ikke alltid leser situasjonen rundt seg så godt. Det blir litt som med engelsk, litt mer «understatement» i dansk enn i norsk.	Många uttrycksätt som för svenskar tenderar att upplevas som ansiktshotande eller ”too much” verkar för danskar fungera som sammanhållande för gruppen. Dansk humor är nog mera byggd på ironi och sarkasm, och man är även duktig på att formulera paradoxer. Svensk humor är ofta grundad i absurda situationer och associationer. En del gemensamt finns också, t ex vad jag skulle kalla för konfliktundvikande.
Explanation?	Det er nok en kultur som kommer fra handel der man i sterke handelsmiljøer har en tone som unngår å fornærme – slik jeg har opplevet det. Der slik handelsmiljø ikke finnes blir det mer eksplisitt og lite fintfølede. Muligens har danskene det slik som engelskmennene at man kan fornærme uten at mottakeren av fornærmelsen forstår det, kun likesinnede forstår ironien.	Konsensus och grupp-sammanhållning är viktigt för båda parter, men extra viktigt för svenskar. Min tanke är att konsensus tas för så självklart grundläggande i en dansk kontext att man inte behöver lägga överdrivet mycket vikt vid att framhålla den (och å andra sidan är det ju skönt att kunna lätta på trycket ibland med lite elak ironi). Därför kan det uppfattas som lite farligare och mera hotfullt att bryta konsensus i svensk kontext än i dansk.

Table 2: Excerpts from questionnaire with a Norwegian and a Swede.

What is striking about these answers is the difference between the Norwegian and the Swede. The Norwegian has a very positive view of Danes that corresponds perfectly with how Danes see themselves and their humour, whereas the Swede relates more disapproving feelings and reactions that are more in line with those of the non-Danes interviewed in earlier studies.

The Norwegian appreciates Danish humour, as recapped here in translation: “Danes are kind and very professional, they are easy-going, well-behaved and extremely efficient. Their tone is *rounded*, inclusive and agreeable. They are not self-pompous, but still respectable. There is more understatement in Danish humour than in Norwegian.”

The Swede is more unenthusiastic and points out what, in his view, are undesirable and harmful characteristics of Danish humour. First, he observes that “the tangible directness of Danes can be perceived by Swedes as a too-close closeness”, as too much familiarity and obtrusion. He also describes Danish humour as sarcasm and irony. He notes that Swedes might perceive this as *face-threatening*, and *too much*. For Danes, this seems to keep the group together (think of the campfire). The Swede sees that we do have something in common, namely conflict avoidance (although by different means).

The fact that the Swede refers to Danes as being direct, too close, face-threatening and sarcastic may indicate that the small conversational bonding and soothing words so frequently used by Danes do not operate in Swedish as humour warning signals as they do in Danish.

When it comes to the explanations, the two responders refer to different sociological factors that we might relate to a difference in the process of civilisation. But of course, with a lot of precautions, given the individual, idiosyncratic character of these two single testimonies. The Norwegian points to “a culture stemming from trade and commerce and strong commercial relationships with a norm of not offending each other.” Indeed, Denmark and Norway have close historical relationships both when it comes to being part of the Dual Monarchy (1537–1814) and within trade and commerce.

Obviously, one could also mention the essayist, philosopher, historian and playwright born in Bergen, Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754), considered the founder of modern Danish and Norwegian literature.

The Swede, for his part, emphasises that *consensus* and *group cohesion* are very important for both Danes and Swedes, but especially important for Swedes, for whom it is more threatening to break consensus than for Danes. From his perspective, Danes do not seem to need to put special weight on respecting consensus, since it is so obviously fundamental and central, and, I might continue, civilised into social trust, and in addition to that, encoded and ingrained in language use.

Without venturing into the details of the historic processes of civilisation characteristic of Sweden and Denmark, respectively, it is tempting to see, in the Swede’s explanation, a trace of the Swedish idea of “*folkhem*” (“the people’s home”), which played an important role in the history of the 20th century welfare state in Sweden. The core of the *folkhem* vision is that society in its entirety ought to be like a family, where everybody contributes, but also where everyone looks after one another. This idea, or this metaphor of *folkhemmet* differs subtly but still substantially from the metaphor of the Danish campfire mentality, in that it emphasises respect and care more than the *hygge* expressed in the Danish cosiness around the fire, knitted together by social trust.

Fiction: A tour with Lars von Trier into Folkhemmet

A hilarious allegory of the *folkhem* makes its way, artfully and yet blatantly into *Riget Exodus*, in a scene staging the Swedish doctor’s torment with his Danish team at *Riget*

and how to repair it. In an AA-style group named “Swedish Anonymous”, in a room (equipped with a special wardrobe for Volvo wheel caps) deep down in the heart of the huge building, Swedish colleagues assemble secretly to “share”; i.e., to share their misfortunes in relation to the Danes and to seek help and moral support from their countrymen to relieve their distress and despair. And common care and sympathy they surely get, as in this scene:

Anonymous Swede: Jag heter Bosse och jag är svensk./My name is Bosse. I’m Swedish.

All: Hi, Bosse. (APPLAUSE)

Doctor Helmer: Är ni alla svenska? Fantastiskt./Are you all Swedish? Fantastic.
Jag heter Stig Jr. och jag är svensk./My name is Stig Jr, and I am Swedish (WHOLEHEARTED, HAPPY LAUGHTER)

All: Hi, Stig.

Doctor Helmer: Danmark talar inte till mig överhuvudtaget, bortsett från det faktum att jag har kommit hit för att uppleva det land, den nation som gjorde min fader sinnessjuk. (...)/Denmark doesn’t appeal to me at all, except for the fact that I came here to experience for myself the country and the nation that drove my father insane. (...)

And they all join in a common (AA) prayer:

All: Sverige, Sverige, giv mig sinnesro att acceptera det jag inte kan ändra, och mod att ändra det jag kan, och visdomen till att se skillnaden./Sweden, Sweden, give me the peace of mind to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change those I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Conclusion

Let me conclude on a double note. From a serious research perspective, I hope to have shown that the concept of humour socialisation can have an important role to play in the description and perhaps delimitation of a Nordic humour. Facts and fiction seem to indicate that verbal humour does not pass smoothly across the borders of (all) Nordic countries, as demonstrated by the Danish-Swedish example; indeed, the Swede’s testimony aligns more with that of the non-Danes in my earlier studies, who were largely repelled by their Danish colleagues’ use of humour. It still remains to be discussed and investigated whether the Nordic countries and their respective “big humour” have more in common with each other than with non-Nordic countries. Or whether the different processes of civilisation we have undergone do, in fact, socialise us into different forms and norms of humour behaviour. Only more linguistic research comparing the inventory, use and frequency of conversational particles as humour warning signals in Danish,

Norwegian and Swedish, together with a methodical historical-sociological investigation of resemblances and differences in the civilising processes of the Nordic countries can bring us closer to an answer.

From a fictitious but no less serious perspective, I shall once again leave the floor to Lars von Trier, who at the end of *Riget Exodus* with his own voice summons “the nations who feel targeted on either side of the Strait” to bear with the humour and “banter” of their neighbours, since “between friends we must tolerate a bite or two”. So, let us end this story of Nordic humour with this positive and edifying moral, which holds for any pair of countries – or regions – having difficulties understanding and accepting each other’s humour:

(...) mange af drillerierne holder ikke op. Mellem venner må vi tåle et stik eller to, for kløen er ubehagelig, men ikke farlig.

(...) much of the banter can never be completely eliminated. Between friends we must tolerate a bite or two, because the itch is uncomfortable, but not dangerous.
(Lars von Trier, last episode of *Riget Exodus*)

Dedication

In memory of Søren, my dear husband.

References

- Clark, Herbert and Richard Gerrig. 1984. “On the pretense theory of irony”. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.113.1.121>
- Curry, Oliver and Robin Dunbar. 2013. “Sharing a joke: The effects of a similar sense of humor on affiliation and altruism”. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 34(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2012.11.003>
- Elias, Norbert. 1994. *The Civilizing Process. History of Manners. State Formation and Civilization*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert and Stephen Mennell. 2006. *The Court Society*. Revised edition. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Flamson, Thomas and H. Clark Barrett. 2008. “The encryption theory of humor: A knowledge-based mechanism of honest signaling”. *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.1556/JEP.6.2008.4.2>
- Flamson, Thomas and H. Clark Barrett. 2013. “Signals of humor. Encryption and laughter in social interaction”. In *Developments in Linguistic Humor Theory*, edited by Martha Dynal, 49–73. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Grice, Paul. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hansen, Erik and Lars Heltoft. 2011. *Grammatik over det Danske Sprog I–III*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.

- Høffding, Harald. 1916. *Den store Humor. En psykologisk studie*. København: Nordisk Forlag.
- Jespersen, Knud J.V. 2004. *A History of Denmark*. New York: Palgrave.
- Kaspersen, Lars Bo. 2008. *Danmark i verden*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Kaspersen, Lars Bo. 2020. "The Creation of Modern Denmark – A Figurational Analysis". *Historical Social Research*, 45(1).
<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.182-206>
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levisen, Carsten. 2012. *Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition*. Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton.
- Lundquist, Lita. 2010. "Humour in intercultural professional settings: A shortcut to language, cognition and identity". In *Language, Cognition and Identity*, edited by Emanuela Cresti and Iørn Korzen, 176–191. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Lundquist, Lita. 2013. "L'humour danois confronté aux autres". In *Frontières de l'humour*, edited by Maria D.V. García, 191–207. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Lundquist, Lita. 2014. "Danish humor in cross-cultural professional settings: linguistic and social aspects". *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2013-0044>
- Lundquist, Lita. 2020. *Humorsocialisering. Hvorfor er danskerne (ikke) så sjove (som de selv tror)?* København: Samfundslitteratur.
- Lundquist, Lita. 2021. "Humour socialisation. Why the Danes are not as funny as they think they are". *Globe*, vol. 12. <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.globe.v12i.6497>
- Lundquist, Lita and Helen Dyrbye. 2023. *Danish Humor – Sink or Swim*. Hellerup: BoD.
- Lundquist, Lita and Magali Gravier. 2019. "You have got to be joking. A study of humour in the political context of the European Parliament". In *Humor, Education and Art: a transdisciplinary approach*, edited by Jacqueline Benavides Delgado, 71–88. Bogota: Ediciones Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia.
- Mellon, Sir James. 1992. *Og gamle Danmark. En beskrivelse af Danmark i det herrens år 1992*. Viby J.: Centrum.
- Sperber, D. and Deirdre Wilson. 1981. "Irony and the use-mention distinction". In *Radical Pragmatics*, edited by Peter Cole, 295–318. New York/London: Academic Press.
- Ziv, Avner. 1988. *National Styles of Humor*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Østergaard, Uffe. 2006. "Denmark: A big small state". In *National Identity and the Varieties of Capitalism. The Danish Experience*, edited by John L. Campbell, John A. Hall and Ove K. Pedersen, 51–98. Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press.