

Linguistic and cultural determinacy of Deaf humour

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Abstract

Addressing the community of the Deaf as a specific cultural group with its own linguistic, social and cultural background, the authors of the article focus on the peculiarities of humorous cartoons and comic strips for/about Deaf recipients. Previous research in the domestic context indicates that the core of the humour in the analysed material stems very often from various communicational misunderstandings, ambiguities and even condemnation emerging from an inability to hear or the fact that a communication tool other than spoken language is being used. The article ponders upon the translatability and transferability of humour in the cartoons and comic strips aimed at a Deaf audience, researching the extent of the cultural determinacy of Deaf humour. This is observed from two aspects – cultural affiliation to the Deaf culture as well as membership of and influence by the culture (and humour traditions) of the hearing society. The authors present the results of ongoing reception research conducted with a sample audience.

Key words: deaf culture, humour, translatability, cartoons, comic strips

Introducing the target audience

Leaving aside detailed characterisation of the very complex term deafness, the target audience under research can be introduced via the contrast between the medical and cultural approach to its denomination. While (simply said) medical deafness is described as a defective audiological condition of not being able to hear and also relates to the term hearing impairment and its levels, the cultural definition of deafness approaches deaf people as members of a specific linguistic and cultural group (Vojtechovský, 2011: 16-23). Applying a cultural, linguistic and sociocultural approach, the undertone of the medical definition – which implies that a person with such a condition is a *patient* that shall be *treated* (ibid.) – is replaced by a view from the point of cultural anthropology. This emphasises cultural and linguistic belonging to a specific sociocultural group – the Deaf. This group also often refers to itself as a cultural and language minority, which arises from the relationship with the hearing majority in a society.

There are numerous definitions of what constitutes the Deaf. While certain views define it in a wider sense – i.e. a group of people with a certain level of hearing loss that identifies with the Deaf community (see Vojtechovský, 2011; Padden, 1989) – other approaches relate the group to severe or profound hearing loss, use of sign language as a tool of communication and as well a sense of identification and belonging to the community (see Mindess 2006; Paddy 2003). The sociological perspective emphasises other important aspects and sees the group more as a community with certain psychological bonds, common goals, views, behavioural norms and patterns, common interests, values, expectations and interests (see Vojtechovský, 2011: 24-25). Furthermore, when speaking about a Deaf community it should be mentioned that a community is always bonded within geographical and socio-political structures and that they reciprocally influence each other.

Deaf culture and humour

One of the main aspects that differentiates the Deaf culture from the culture of the hearing majority is the modality of representation and communication. Because of their hearing condition, their hierarchy of senses differs and consequently so does their view of the world. The Deaf culture is considered a visual culture (see Vojtechovský, 2011: 43). This means that cognition and interpretation of the world by the Deaf is different and also conditioned by using a different communication tool. How does this influence particular aspects of Deaf culture? Does Deaf humour differ? To what extent?

The omnipresence of humour in everyday encounters, be it in social, professional or media contexts, proves that it is a quintessential part of our reality. As Simon Critchley points out in his book *On Humour*, humour is “an anthropological constant, [it] is universal and common to all cultures” (2002: 28). Humour constitutes our humanity and can be, in fact, regarded as a consequence of culture and of civilization (ibid.). Though humour appears to be a universal phenomenon in terms of the emotional responses it generates, it is certainly tied to some culturally and geographically determined particularities. Focusing on the culture and understanding of the Deaf as a cultural minority group, their humour bears several characteristics which distinguish it from the hearing majority.

Rachel Sutton-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli who conducted research on sign language and Deaf jokes observe the visual character of Deaf humour, emphasising that it is “not just conveyed in a visual-manual modality, but relying on that modality for the humour itself” (2012: 311). The modality thus functions as a tool of expression as well as a topic. It might be suggested that its modality offers another type of expression. As Vojtechovský points out, Deaf humour is distinctive in its “exaggeration, maximal use of the signing space, intentional ‘late’ or ‘backwards’ signing, etc.” (see Vojtechovský, 2011: 87). According to Sutton-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli (2012: 311-312), these also motivate the content of Deaf jokes, wit and humorous anecdotes, often applying the motif of visual linguistic medium specifics. The visual experience and visually based linguistic communication are two of the crucial facets of Deaf culture. Introducing them via humour, its members are able to share a different experience. It helps to strengthen their identification with the group and reinforce the rules and patterns of behaviour in the group but also challenges some aspects of certain behaviours of group members. Sutton-Spence and Jo Napoli add that it often “attack[s] the in-group in order to show up the less-desirable aspects of the culture” (ibid.: 313).

Since humour in general “is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented [...], between expectation and actuality” (Critchley, 2002: 1), it necessarily creates a novel actuality which seeks to “defamiliarize the familiar, demythologize the exotic and invert the world of common sense” (ibid.: 65). Moreover, humour helps to reflect the realities of our lives by drawing on the knowledge and experience of shared social practices. These strategies are included also in Deaf humour categories we suggest, based on our research of numerous jokes, anecdotes, comic strips and other relevant materials. For simplification, we put aside the formal characteristics for now and focus on the main topical characterisations which reveal different aspects of Deaf culture. These are:

- Interaction with hearing people– which stems from the power division between the hearing majority and Deaf minority and misunderstanding in their communication. It reflects the encounters between two worlds and the situations emerging from contact between them. The prevailing standpoint is of an oppressed minority fighting back against the majority group;

- Deaf people's lives and encounters – which portrays the common experience of deaf people not only in interaction with their hearing counterparts but also d/Deaf society itself. Significant are motifs of criticism within the community, criticism of rejecting deafness (such as jokes and anecdotes related to the cochlear implants, hearing aids, inability to sign and preference of oralism, pretending to be a hearing person) and strategies challenging the status of the “handicap” or disability (e.g. standard jokes about a blind man, a wheelchair-bound man and a deaf man);
- Sign language as a source and tool of the humorous moment – frequent motif of anecdotes and jokes focusing on the Deaf themselves or their interaction with their hearing counterparts. A commonly used strategy is the use of ambiguous signs related to the spoken form of language, bilingual puns and games or use of new signs.

Quite often we can also observe a tendency to incline towards black humour and disclosure of taboo topics related to society. As Sutton-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli point out, “[t]aboo threatens any society, and is thus a suitable topic for humour” (2012: 313). “Threatening” leads to revelation, endorses communication and encourages crossing the boundaries which can be applied when dealing with hearing society interaction as well as “in-group” challenging. Furthermore, as we implied before, the humour of the Deaf (and their culture as a whole) cannot be seen in an isolated manner. Deaf culture exists and develops in interaction with the national culture and surrounding hearing society. The humour of the Deaf is thus not only influenced by the traditions of hearing society but also becomes a tool of communication with it. The question is how eligible the tool is to both groups and where the intersection that could lead to fulfilling an intercultural dialogue is.

Translatability and transferability of Deaf humour

The saying “humour does not travel well” implies potential variations in the ways humour can be manifested and thus (mis)understood. Obviously, the questions of what is considered humorous or acceptable will depend not only on individual preferences of the interlocutor/recipient but also on some culture-specific elements and aspects which inevitably impact the content of the humorous discourse. In fact, as Delia Chiaro points out, when transferred into a new geographical and cultural context, “humour has to come to terms with linguistic and cultural elements which are only typical of the source culture from which it was produced thereby losing its power to amuse in the new location” (Chiaro, 2010: 1). Transporting humour across cultures and cultural norms is thus a rather delicate task. Even though in the case of communication between members of the Deaf culture and hearing society we (at the basic level within a country) remain in the same geographical context, cultural specifics emerging from the definition of Deaf culture must be taken into consideration. We cannot neglect that humour “occurs when a rule has not been followed, when an expectation is set-up and not confirmed, when the incongruity is resolved in an alternative way” (Vandaele, 2010: 149). Since the rules, expectations and social practices of particular groups of people are bound to be determined by their cultural background, humour might not translate well in all cultural settings. In that sense, humour “depends on implicit cultural schemes (to be breached for incongruous purposes; to be known for the purpose of comical “solution”) and has its rules and taboos for targeting (telling what or whom may be laughed at)” (ibid.: 150).

Moreover, when it comes to translating humour, one frequently encounters the problem of untranslatability which is usually associated with aspects of a linguistic and not only cultural character. As far as language is concerned, translators

have come to terms with standard linguistic challenges arising from the differences between the source and target linguistic systems, as well as various sociolinguistic and metalinguistic characteristics. Humorous discourse “is notoriously constructed through extreme exploitations of the linguistic options available in a given language” (Delia, 2011: 367) which thus makes finding an adequate equivalence in the target language quite problematic. That indeed can be even more challenging if we are pondering upon different languages in terms of their modality – national language vs. national sign language (e.g. Slovak sign language) which differs in form of presentation (visual/manual communication to convey meaning) but is still also specific from the linguistic point of view. Vojtechovský points out that the humour of the Deaf is often not understood by the hearing society and that the Deaf do not laugh at the humour of the hearing because “they simply don’t understand it” (2011: 86). That just confirms the elaboration of the concept of two linguistically and culturally distinctive systems.

One might argue that – as well as in the case of other language and cultural communities – there is always a certain intersection, a point when the same motif / situation / elaboration might fulfil the same communicational function. Also in our case, we would find some that can be translated into English or hearing society language in general; where naturally we are focusing on the material which is “transferrable” and the main moment is not conditioned by the use of sign language. However, as Sutton-Spence and Jo Napoli certify “considerable cultural information would be lost” (2012: 330). They prove their assertion via the example of the well-known joke about a Deaf man, a blind man and a man in a wheelchair (ibid.):

A blind man, a man in a wheelchair and a Deaf man all go to the barber. He cuts their hair for free as part of his commitment to National Disability Week. The blind man gives him a bunch of 12 roses to say thank you, the man in the wheelchair gives him a box of 12 chocolates to say thank you and the Deaf man tells 12 of his friends who also come for a free haircut.

As they clarify the humour for a hearing person would be related to the ungrateful and inconsiderate behaviour of the Deaf man. For members of Deaf culture however there would be other two entertaining aspects – the fact that the Deaf are always eager to let each other know about something good and useful going on and the common motif of taking advantage of hearing people (ibid.) which can again be interpreted in the background of the power division between the hearing majority and the Deaf minority.

Delia Chiaro states that humorous texts “often entail recognition of cultural elements with which it would be impossible to be familiar without having had direct exposure to them” (Delia, 2010: 8). Any culture- or geography-specific references thus might be misunderstood or not understood at all since the recipient in the target culture has never been exposed to them. The understanding of their meaning and connotations, necessary for achieving humorous effect, would be lost on the target audience, as happened in the example introduced by Sutton-Spence and Jo Napoli. In that respect, the attempt to “translate” between these two groups must be seen not only as interlingual (when possible) but also as intercultural operation.

Deaf cartoons and comic strips as an ice-breaker for the hearing society

As Isabel Ermida and Jan Chovanec point out in their essay *Humour, Language and the Media*, the language of humour was originally studied in the area of rhetoric. It was seen as “a useful tool for nimble orators, provided that its use was prudent and balanced” (2012: 1) and was touched upon by such masters as Cicero, Quintilian and Aristotle. Besides the attempts to study the language of humour in the sphere of public

speaking, it was primarily scrutinised by literary studies, which analysed humour both across various genres and periods. Eventually, linguistically and pragmatically oriented research looked into the matter, as “more systematic linguistic treatments of the humorous phenomenon saw the light of day in the fourth quarter of the 20th century” (ibid.: 2). The present study does not seek to provide a diachronic overview of all the different approaches and perspectives but it deems it essential to acknowledge the complexity as well as the interdisciplinary nature of the topic.

The focus of this paper is placed predominantly on comic cartoons and comic strips which represent an interesting medium for humorous discourse since they do not depend on verbal communication only. As in cartoons, humour “may rely on the conventions of caricature, pantomime, etc. as well as on comic-specific conventions such as drawn sounds and onomatopoeia, motion lines, pictograms, etc.” (Zanettin, 2010: 43). The interconnection between visual and verbal signs, as well as the sequential character of the narrative, provides a vital array of tools for creating humorous effect. Focusing on the humour of the Deaf and its use in the communication with hearing society, it might be assumed that the form and strategies of this genre might provide a space for a dialogue that has been lacking until now.

Comic strips use verbal elements to the extent of making the genre more eligible to the Deaf, and the modality connecting the verbal elements to the visual ones enables (in comparison with other types of “more verbal” media) more inherent orientation in meanings.

Even though not much has been researched and written on this topic numerous comic strips have been created about, for and by Deaf people. Some of the very first portrayals of the members of the Deaf community can be found in the 1950s in Flanders, the 1960s in Belgium and in the 1970s in the USA, in the daily strip *Dondi* by Gus Edson and Irwin Hasen. A deaf character also appears in 1997-1998 *Spiderman* and other popular comic series. All these comics however were created by hearing authors and the Deaf characters are minor, often portrayed very stereotypically. They use simplified sign language to communicate with their hearing counterparts and rather often they are used in order to create humour based on misunderstanding, or they are placed in the position of the weak being saved by the strong hearing hero (see Hennies, 2003). The production of Deaf comic works – particularly comic strips – by Deaf authors increases towards the end of the 20th century. Many of them are being published mainly in the magazines for the Deaf (e.g. S. Richardson, L. Kollien, R. Mallet, T. Davidson) and satirically portray the everyday life encounters of the group (ibid.). A shift from introducing Deaf characters as minor and disadvantaged to a humorous and satirical portrayal of the Deaf community and its interaction with hearing society opens the space for a dialogue and reveals and confronts the taboos on both sides. Of course such dialogue requires a certain preparedness and compromise regarding the cultural and communicational specifics included.

Approaching the humorous comic strips as a tool to communicate certain topics between the Deaf and hearing society, we surveyed a sample from hearing Slovak society in terms of its knowledge and questions related to the Slovak Deaf community. Since the survey is still ongoing and is part of more complex research, we will focus only on its major results relevant to the topic of this paper. The survey was completed with 103 participants aged 21-53, out of which 82 do not have close relation or experience with a member of the Deaf community. It was aimed at awareness, knowledge and perception of the Slovak Deaf community, and it attempted to map the stereotypes and prepossessions of the hearing community towards the Deaf. Besides other questions respondents were asked to list the areas of Deaf life they lack authentic information about or simply which they are curious

about. An additional task required them to state whether they would feel comfortable asking a deaf person directly about the listed matters.

Based on the results of the survey, the areas of interest can be grouped into three main categories:

- existence and identification within hearing society – everyday situations, everyday communication within hearing society, working environment, education, coping with everyday matters, financial situation;
- deaf people’s family life – mixed families, children and their audiological status, communication with children and hearing society, upbringing, folklore, literacy and sex life.
- life within the Deaf community – questions related to identification of the group, personal characteristics, use of sign language, requirements and peculiarities of sign language communication.

When looking at the suggestions of the respondents in more detail, many of them reflected a more general taboo character– asking about money, salaries, benefits, asking about the pitfalls of being “disadvantaged” or on the contrary being “advantaged” (e.g. economically), asking about communication difficulties with a hearing partner/child, or particular communicational aspects such as arguing in sign language or flirting, insulting, etc. Evaluating the expressed appropriateness to discuss these aspects directly, an interesting correlation regarding experiences with a member of Deaf community appeared. While respondents with such experience indicated that direct communication would be semi-appropriate or sometimes even appropriate, the remaining majority of respondents marked it as inappropriate, offensive or unwelcome. That might reflect a fear of addressing some of the topics in case we feel unfamiliar with the subject, which subsequently become taboo topics of communication.

All of the abovementioned areas can be seen in an intersection with the main topical areas of Deaf humour that we suggested earlier (interaction with hearing people, Deaf people’s lives and encounters and sign language communication). Furthermore these are also the aspects very often portrayed in humorous comic strips about and by Deaf people. Considering the modality of this genre and the specifics of its communicational strategies, it could be suggested that they might be seen also as an interesting tool of communication between the Deaf and hearing society, revealing taboos, challenging ambiguities and confronting stereotypes.

Conclusion and further suggestions

Addressing the community of the Deaf as a specific cultural group with its own linguistic, social and cultural background, the authors of the article focused on the peculiarities of humorous cartoons and comic strips for/about Deaf recipients and suggested the main topic areas they convey. The survey of hearing society suggested that there is an evident intersection between the areas hearing people feel they don’t have sufficient authentic information about. Furthermore, the responses in the survey suggest that they considered them to be some form of taboo – feeling they are not appropriate to be asked directly. The aim of the contribution was to introduce the area of Deaf humour comic strips as a possible communicational tool which might serve not only to discuss specific encounters within the Deaf community but which might also help to bridge gaps and help to address taboo issues on both sides. The modality of comic strips, the topics the Deaf comic strips broach and the manner which might be approachable by both groups suggest that these types of work might be enriching in the cultural interaction of the Deaf and hearing society.

So far, most of these works have been published in magazines and websites for members of the Deaf community and therefore more detailed insight is required into their reception by a hearing audience. Another aspect which needs to be analysed

is the specifics of the described modality in correlation to the humour of the comic strips and cartoons as a tool of communication between both audiences. That should be approached within the background of intercultural communication, observed from two aspects – cultural affiliation to the Deaf culture as well as membership of and influence by the culture (and humorous traditions) of hearing society.

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