

SOCIAL HARM(LESSNESS) OF GENDER HUMOUR: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER-DISPARAGING VERBAL HUMOUR

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Abstract

This paper critically addresses the issue of gender discrimination in gender-disparaging humour. The aim of the paper is to review the research conducted within the studies of humour, gender, and language, on the issue of whether and how gender-disparaging humour influences the creation and perpetuation of gender-discriminatory stereotypes and, if it does, whether such humour warrants censorship and whether it is discriminatory inherently or depending on other factors. The paper comprises influential theories of humour and relevant theories from gender studies, used in conjunction to frame the critical analysis of gender disparagement in jokes. The analysis is based on gender-related cultural patterns in Serbia and Anglo-American countries, compared through short canned jokes in English and their translatability into Serbian.

Key words: verbal humour, disparaging jokes, gender, discrimination, translatability.

ДРУШТВЕНА (БЕЗ)ОПАСНОСТ РОДНОГ ХУМОРА: КРИТИЧКА АНАЛИЗА РОДНООМАЛОВАЖАВАЈУЋЕГ ЈЕЗИЧКОГ ХУМОРА

Апстракт

Рад пружа критички осврт на проблем родне дискриминације у родноомаловажавајућем хумору. Циљ рада је да представи истраживања у оквиру студија хумора, рода и језика која се тичу питања да ли и како родноомаловажавајући хумор утиче на стварање и јачање роднодискриминаторних стереотипа. Главно питање, за које још увек нема консензуса, јесте да ли такав хумор заслужује цензуру, односно да ли му је раслојавајући ефекат инхерентан или зависи од других фактора. Предмет рада су утицајне теорије хумора, као и релевантне теорије родних студија, које су заједно послужиле као оквир за критичку анализу родног омаловажавања у вицевима. Подлогу анализе чине културни родни образци Србије и англо-америчких земаља, поређени помоћу кратких припремљених вицева на енглеском језику и њихове преводивости на српски језик.

Кључне речи: језички хумор, омаловажавајући вицеви, род, родна дискриминација, преводивост.

HUMOUR STUDIES – THEORIES OF SUPERIORITY

Language, humour, and culture, are distinctively human features. Verbal communication and laughter went hand in hand even before the first civilizations developed and have ever since been integral parts of our being. Walter Nash (1985, p. 1) believes that “humour is a specifying characteristic of humanity”, comparable in this respect to “the power of speech, the mathematical gift, the gripping thumb”. Despite numerous scientific theories and schools which have interpreted language and laughter in different ways (e.g. as innate, imitative, or socially conditioned) and across disciplines (psychology, biology, sociology, anthropology, etc.) since ancient times, so far no one has been able to fully answer the question “*what is funny, why it is funny, how it is funny, when it is funny, and to whom it is funny*” (Raskin, 1998, p. 3). There are also different classifications of humour theories, the best known of which is the tripartite classification: theories of incongruity (cognitive), which are the most common, theories of superiority (social), and release/relief theories (psychoanalytical) (Raskin, 1985, pp. 30-41). Sociologist of science, Michael Mulkey (1988; as cited in Crawford, 2003, pp. 1419-20), sees humour as a distinct mode of discourse, which differs from the ‘serious’ mode of discourse in that it presupposes a conventional acceptance of ambiguity, paradox, multiple interpretations of reality, and partial resolutions of incongruity, whereas the serious discourse conventionally strives towards explicit disambiguation and resolution of every paradox and contradiction.

Superiority theories are directly associated with disparagement. The idea that someone else’s misfortune makes people laugh is as old as Plato and Aristotle, although most proponents of superiority theories refer to Thomas Hobbes, according to whom “the *passion of laughter* is nothing else but a *sudden glory* arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly” (Raskin, 1985, p. 36). Superiority theories cannot explain every aspect of humour, such as puns or surrealist and absurd humour, but they are still grounded in the reality of human existence. Since superiority theories are the oldest of all theories of humour, the feeling of superior pleasure when experiencing someone else’s weakness or misfortune (*Ger. Schadenfreude*) can be considered a primal human trait. Indeed, almost everyone has laughed or smiled seeing someone slipping on a banana peel or being tripped up. Likewise, most people have witnessed, if not experienced, school bullying but most people have also abandoned this behavioural pattern while growing up. It could be theorized that *Schadenfreude* is inherent in all humans, but the reason adults do not react like children is the “civilizing and restraining influence of culture over the centuries” (Raskin, 1985, p. 37). Psychologically, it is the gradual civilizational stifling of the urge to express one’s own deeply-rooted insecurity through explicit display of superiority (from laughter to physical violence) that underlies disparaging jokes.

HUMOUR AND DISPARAGEMENT

Studies indicate that disparaging humour is commonly used for negative discrimination or stereotyping of minority/target groups by majority groups on an ethnic, racial, or gender basis, or any combination of the three (Ford et al., 2008; Ford et al., 2014; Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). However, discrimination can also be positive; whether discrimination is positive or negative depends on many factors, e.g. context, intention, joke teller, or joke recipient. Thus, some jokes about the characteristics of Jewish people can be used either as tools for disparagement, e.g. when told within a group of anti-Semites, or as tools for highlighting ethnic/national pride, e.g. when told by the Jewish people themselves (Rappoport, 2005, pp. 1-2). Mulvey et al. (2016, p. 1380) agree that “humour usually serves a positive function for group cohesiveness, but the content of the humour may be deeply prejudicial, promote discrimination, or be damaging to particular individuals or groups”. In the latter case, the aforementioned idea that civilization stifles the urge to express insecurity through explicit display of superiority is no longer valid, because humour is used as an additional tool for explicit display of superiority. Yet, in most of the modern society, humour is mainly used to convey implicit messages or for its own sake. In modern times, the dynamic of the relationship ‘majorities ridiculing minorities’ has changed profoundly because over time the minorities ‘struck back’ by openly ridiculing the majorities. Furthermore, one majority group often ridicules another, which is well exemplified by men telling jokes about women and vice versa (Rappoport, 2005, p. 2). There is also self-deprecating humour, which can be interpreted differently within a group.

Two key issues should be considered. First, the joke teller may have a malevolent intention to implicitly ridicule a target group and make that, rather than the humorous effect of the joke, the primary goal. If the joke recipient correctly interprets the malevolence, the teller can use the humour as a hedge – it was all in jest. Conversely, the teller may have a good intention of only making someone laugh, only to have it interpreted as malevolent by the recipient. Another issue is the appropriateness of disparagement humour in specific social circumstances. Yus (2016, pp. 54-59) proposes a list of negative contextual constraints and non-propositional effects that affect the success of any humorous communication, which include suitability, recipient’s background knowledge and beliefs, and the gender of communicators, among others. Consequently, gender-disparaging joking entails different implications depending on the gender of the joke teller and recipient, which raises the issue of attitude towards disparagement humour in general, i.e. its degree of acceptability depending on a variety of factors.

Rappoport (Ibid, xii-xiii) observed that most people are aware of the universality of disparagement humour (typically racial, ethnic, and gender

jokes), present in all human groups, and that everyone can appreciate the creativity of the authors/performers of humour, as evidenced by the decades of mass popularity of stand-up comedy in the Western countries, but in recent years also in Serbia. Many comediennes and comedians of all races and ethnicities use disparagement humour in their performances and manage to elicit laughter from the audience, which comprises members of various social groups, including those being disparaged. It can be hypothesised that institutionalized communication of humour involves implicit and collective acceptance of humour as a hedge, i.e. it is not understood as malevolent. Rappoport (Ibid, xiii) attributes this phenomenon to suspension of reality, which is also responsible for allowing people to enjoy any kind of fiction not rooted in physical reality. The same suspension of reality is required for disparagement humour in order for any humorous effect to be achieved.

HUMOUR AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Regarding the relationship between language and gender, Victoria Bergvall (1999, p. 274) claims that such studies essentially depend on the questions “WHETHER there is gender differentiation of language use, WHENCE it arises, WHAT FORMS it takes linguistically, and WHATEFFECTS it has in society”. These questions also apply to the relationship of verbal humour and gender as verbal humour is yet another manifestation of language. The relationship between language and gender is viewed differently through three historical theories within this discipline.

Theory of dominance considers men the carriers of language, which serves to establish dominance over women, whereas the language of women is deviant and deficient as compared to that of men (Ibid, p. 277). Deviant use of language also refers to any use that ‘stands out’ among the socially-acceptable patterns, not necessarily associated exclusively with women (see Filipović, 2009, p. 128). This also includes gender and sexually explicit jokes.

Theory of difference emphasizes the existence and mutual acceptance of linguistic differences and establishes women as superior conversationalists, which is due to different socialization from childhood, whereby girls learn to socialize through conversation and verbal expression of emotions, as opposed to boys (Bergvall, 1999, p. 277). Concerning humour, men are considered more aggressive from an early age, and although humour can be used as a justification or hedge for an implicit insult when part of disparagement humour, there are still differences between the levels of aggressiveness (Kotthoff, 2006, pp. 13-14). This is due to traditional determination of women as demure and through their ‘ladylike’ behaviour – passiveness and desire for male approval, which runs counter to the aggressive nature of humour, which is why a sense of

humour was long considered a non-female trait (Ibid, p. 14). This phenomenon is also reflected in the corporate context, through the stereotype of a woman of high professional status who has no sense of humour or who does not use any humour, which might be seen as a consequence of traditional women's joking for self-disparagement as opposed to men's joking at someone else's expense (Ibid, pp. 9-10).

Theory of performativity is based on active construction of individual's gender identity through membership in the so-called Communities of Practice (CofP). CofP are groups of people united by a common enterprise and sharing values, way of speaking, and the manner of performing those actions, while simultaneously developing and establishing their own gender, cultural, social, age, racial, sexual, and other status for the purpose of achieving common social goals. All these processes are gathered around a common practice and it is the very inclusion of the practical aspect that differentiates CofP from e.g. speech communities or social networks (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Filipović, 2009). CofP emphasize the variability of gender differences, not only between men and women, but also within the same gender groups, with variability being an inevitable result of the membership of any given individual in a number of overlapping CofP (Bergvall, 1999, p. 279). According to social constructivism, gender is perceived as a verb, not as a noun, hence the phrase *doing gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987; as cited in Crawford, 2003, p. 1417). Humour is another in a series of ways of doing gender, whereby women typically use humour that creates solidarity and builds intimacy, while men use it to compete in order to gain or improve their status (Crawford, 2003, p. 1421). Studies of conversational humour in same-gender groups of friends have shown that humour within female groups typically involves collaboration in the construction of femininity (Ibid, p. 1422), whereas men construct masculinity through humour by means of reaffirmation of their own heterosexuality, either by objectifying or sexualizing women (Mulkay, 1988; as cited in Crawford, 2003, p. 1423-24) or by disparaging men who are not manly enough, attributing homosexual characteristics to them (Cameron, 1997; as cited in Crawford, 2003, pp. 1423-24 and Meyerhoff, 2006, pp. 232-233). However, it is uncertain whether conversational overlapping and the finishing of each other's sentences typical of men constitutes collaboration or competition (Meyerhoff, 2006, p. 233).

American psychologist Mary Crawford (2003, pp. 1424-27) sees humour as a mechanism of gender deconstruction, or a resistance towards the dominant male constructions of femininity. Humour most often deconstructs gender when used by a group of female friends in everyday conversation or when used as a means of political struggle by the feminist movement.

Those versed in gender humour agree that three generalizations can be made about it: 1) gender humour is virtually universal because globally both men and women tell disparaging and stereotype jokes about one another;

2) men usually tell jokes ridiculing women more often than vice versa; and 3) women are more likely to laugh at jokes told by men than vice versa (Rappoport, 2005, p. 102). Generalizations 2 and 3 are in keeping with the traditionally passive and reserved role of women and their search for approval from men. Indeed, this imbalance is significantly reduced nowadays, especially in the western world, but is still very much present in the prominently traditional societies of Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Ibid.). The first generalization is based on the differences in sexuality and social power – everywhere there has always been covert or open sexual tension between men and women, as well as the traditional differentiation of roles. The second generalization stems from the historically established male dominance, which has been considerably undermined in the West, while it is still fairly visibly maintained in Serbia. Likewise, a higher degree of gender equality infused men with some uncertainty as to their centuries-long undisturbed dominance, so in the age of political correctness and increased social awareness, humour proved to be a perfect mechanism for the reaffirmation of masculinity. Naturally, women were not idling about, either, and responded in kind – with disparaging jokes about men. The third generalization, as mentioned above, pertains to the traditional socialization of women towards submitting to male dominance.

GENDER-DISPARAGING JOKES

Due to the limited size of this paper, short question/answer-type canned jokes in English, whose translation to Serbian would retain all the relevant elements, are used to exemplify the issue. In addition to their brevity, the examples were also selected due to their prototypical nature concerning gender-disparaging humour in both Serbian and Anglo-American cultures, as such jokes are regularly included in joke collections and anthologies in both languages. The jokes involve one of the dominant social roles that men and women in these cultures, as well as in most occidental societies, attribute to the opposite sex.

▪ *Why don't women need a wrist watch? There's a perfectly good one on the stove.* (Thripshaw, 2010, p. 1185). Here the joke recipient is first misled to think about women and time (punctuality, innate sense of time), after which the punch line highlights the traditional role of women as homemakers who spend all their time in the kitchen.

▪ *Why do women shave under their arms? So they can iron faster.* (Ibid, p. 1171). The punch line again defines women as homemakers doing housework with such dedication that they would even resort to shaving their armpits for the sake of efficiency. What is also ridiculed is the modern women's attitude towards the aesthetics of physical appearance and hygiene.

▪ *How many people does it take to write a sexist joke? Two – the man to dictate it and the woman to type it.* (Ibid, p. 1175). The joke emphasizes the social role of women who are no longer homemakers but work at the office together with men, but in a subordinated role of a secretary, which used to be the highest position women could attain in the corporate hierarchy. In Serbia, this stereotype is still paralleled in reality, as secretary (or, nowadays, personal assistant) remains the prevalent female corporate position.

▪ *Why did God create women? Because dogs can't get beer out of the fridge.* (Ibid, p. 1177). This joke disparages women on multiple levels, because not only does it portray them as mere servants of men, but also deems them less valuable than dogs. Although it is aimed at ridiculing women, the joke could also be interpreted as criticizing men as lazy beer-drinkers.

▪ *What three words are guaranteed to destroy a man's ego? "Is it in?"* (Ibid, p. 1163). This joke tries to 'hit men where it hurts' by attacking their sexuality, on which they frequently pride themselves, and which is the most common method of construction of masculinity.

▪ *How can you tell if a man is sexually aroused? He's breathing.* (Ibid.). The joke emphasizes men's one-sidedness through their obsession with sex, which is equated with life itself, thus rendering men one-dimensional caricatures.

▪ *How many bright, sensitive, caring men in the world does it take to do the dishes? Both of them.* (Ibid, p. 1164). Here, men are portrayed as stereotypes of stupid, insensitive, and careless people, with an added irony of an activity that used to be imposed on women.

▪ *What do toilet bowls, anniversaries and clitorises have in common? Men miss all of them.* (Ibid, p. 1165). Similar to the previous joke, this one also represents an entire 'package' of disparagement.

Sociologist Christie Davies (2005) dealt with the issue of translatability of ethnic European jokes between different European languages and cultures. He sees three possible options for translating such jokes, provided that no untranslatable pun has been used: 1) jokes can be transferred to the target language if both cultures share the same pattern; 2) jokes can be replaced if the target language/culture does not share the pattern but has an equivalent in the form of another, equally-treated, ethnicity; and 3) jokes are problematic if the pattern is distinctive for the source culture of the joke. If we were to apply these options to translating the abovegender jokes into Serbian, we would see that they do not contain any untranslatable puns or specific idiocultural references, so they can be translated without any modifications, which indicates that there are shared cultural patterns and views of male-female relationships. Such a conclusion may appear counter-intuitive to most Serbs considering the more prevalent traditional values and male dominance across the Serbian social sphere as

compared to the English-speaking countries (although some improvement is noticeable as the 21st century progresses). An acceptable explanation could be that globalization and Anglo-American social patterns influenced Serbian culture, primarily through media and technology, where humour is one of the most frequent western ‘imports’.

On the other hand, it might be argued that the jokes reflect the expectations of men and women – men expect women to be their subordinates and to meet their physical needs, whereas women expect men to meet both their emotional and physical needs, only without insisting on female dominance. If this were proven true, then gender humour could be explained as a reaction to the frustration over unfulfilled expectations, which falls within the domain of psychoanalytical relief theories (see above p. 2). A propos, it is seemingly obvious that most gender humour is based on the male-female relationship and that one gender is always understood in the context of the other. This is in keeping with the generalization that gender humour is universal, which poses a question whether jokes that disparage exclusively men or exclusively women are possible. The answer appears to be negative because, for better or worse, the gender categories are mutually dependent and one would make no sense without the other.

Christie Davies (2010, p. 38) thinks that the only logical use of the comparative method in the study of jokes is when a joke cycle that originated in one country or cultural unity later reaches another country or culture with or without modifications. The aforementioned globalization introduced to Serbia the jokes about attractive and dumb blondes, dating back to the American vaudevilles and burlesques, in which performers added heavy-breasted blond-haired (or blond-wigged) assistants to their acts in order to attract as much, prevalently male, audience as possible (Rappoport, 2005, p. 113). The stereotype of an attractive dumb blonde became fully established with the appearance of Hollywood actresses such as Marilyn Monroe. In Serbia, the Blonde, as a stereotypical joke character, is an extremely stupid and promiscuous person, the cultural pattern shared with the Anglo-American countries and requiring no modification, which is not the case with England, where the stereotype was modified to include a more pronounced social aspect by being transferred to the Essex Girl character (Davies, 2010, p. 39). Of course, these jokes are also fully translatable from English to Serbian and vice versa provided they do not contain any pun.

Cultural overlap of jokes is also found in the character of the mother-in-law (Serb. *tašta* for the wife’s mother and *svekrva* for the husband’s mother), although the role of the woman here is more specific – the mother of one spouse and the arch-enemy of the other.

With the exception of blondes, women in Serbian jokes are usually presented as forming a pair with their husband, e.g. Fata and Mujo (Bosnian stereotypes), Sosa and Lala (stereotypes from Vojvodina), or

Ciganka and Ciga (Gypsy woman and Gypsy man) (see Trifunović, 2009), but the gender humour of these characters is intertwined with ethnic and even social humour. A similar combination of gender and ethnic humour is found in American jokes about Jewish or African American 'Princesses', which were told and propagated by Jewish and African American comedians themselves, respectively, and whose context is specific for their respective cultures (Rappoport, 2005, pp. 101-102).

CONCLUSION

Gender-disparaging jokes target both women and men, women as a reflex or an actualization of male dominance ideologies, and men as a manifestation of women's revolt against such ideologies. As opposed to jokes, the reality is somewhat different, both in Serbia, where institutional male dominance is still present, and in Anglo-American countries, especially the United States, with their gender pay gap issue. Therefore, humour is a unique mechanism of gender equalization or, more accurately, gender balancing, albeit not completely reflected in social reality.

There are conflicting opinions regarding the use of humour and the risk of widening the gender gap and reinforcing stereotypes. Psychologists Ford and Ferguson (2004) showed that the interpretation of gender-disparaging humour as purely jocular and not serious in itself raises the tolerance threshold for gender discrimination, which can have severe social consequences. A more recent psychological study even showed that exposure to gender humour proportionally increases the proclivity for rape (Thomae & Tendayi Viki, 2013). With some exceptions, gender humour is usually censored in the media, but is ever-present in everyday communication and in many stand-up comedic performances, and there is no indication that this trend will falter, especially given the cultural 'breakthrough' of homosexuality and a few other gender-related subcultures in the last twenty or so years (not in Serbia, however), which automatically extended the paradigm of gender humour by adding new types of gender relations. In addition, the social status of both women and men is constantly changing, which means that the changes cannot go unnoticed in humour and jokes (Rappoport, 2005, p. 117).

Although it is fairly plausible that gender-disparaging humour is potentially socially dangerous, as it can propagate and reinforce stereotypes, such a view should not be generalized, since humour perception depends on a number of factors, such as individual values or social conditioning. Consequently, it is a rushed argument to label any type or genre of humour, in whichever manner it is presented, as inherently socially dangerous. The danger is obvious when there is malicious intent, which involves the human factor. Without any ideological shading, humour in its purest form is an instigator of laughter, or at least of pleasure of understanding the wittiness

of the punch line. Considering that it is difficult to qualify humour as a phenomenon inherently devoid of any human factor (after all, humour is as distinct a human construct as any other art form) and that intent, whether benevolent or malicious, is almost always a factor, disparagement humour should not be subject to matter-of-fact censorship in our opinion, and any censorship decisions should include a wide variety of factors. What does warrant some improvement is the education about the sources and meanings of stereotypes, because it would allow considerably more people to enjoy humour for humour's sake, regardless of the theme; as demonstrated by the totality of humorous output throughout human history, one property of humour – that nothing is sacred – might be considered truly inherent, which is how it should remain.¹

From a purely linguistic perspective, even the most vulgar gender jokes constitute a genuine treasure house for semantic, pragmatic, and other linguistic studies, so any restriction on verbal humour could be interpreted as a restriction on language itself.

Finally, Rappoport's suspension of reality can help clarify the issue (see above p. 4): if we can read or watch Harry Potter and Peter Pan with the knowledge that humans cannot fly on their own or using a broomstick, we can also differentiate the humorous idea that women have smaller feet in order to stand closer to the sink when doing the dishes (Thripshaw, 2010, p. 1179) from the *knowledge* that women are by no means defined by the role of homemaker, and that doing the dishes is merely an activity performed by men, women, and children, necessary for good health and proper hygiene in human food consumption. Thus, it would appear that the 'knowledge' portion and not the 'humour' portion is what is socially harmful. The core issue remains whether it is possible to consider humour separately from its social use and role. Accordingly, we have to agree with Ford et al. (2017) that "[d]isparagement humour is far more than 'just a joke'. Thus, understanding and raising awareness of its potential consequences represents a critical project of social importance."

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¹ The author is fully aware of the controversy surrounding the issue, especially after the attack of the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015.

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ДРУШТВЕНА (БЕЗ)ОПАСНОСТ РОДНОГ ХУМОРА: КРИТИЧКА АНАЛИЗА РОДНООМАЛОВАЖАВАЈУЋЕГ ЈЕЗИЧКОГ ХУМОРА

Предраг Никетић

Универзитет у Нишу, Факултет заштите на раду, Ниш, Србија

Резиме

Рад представља преглед истраживања о природи односа између језичког хумора и рода кроз критичку анализу родне дискриминације на примеру одабраних вицева. Теоријски оквир рада је мултидисциплинаран и укључује теорије хумора из домена психологије, лингвистике, социологије, као и релевантне теорије из родних студија, у покушају да се одговори на питања да ли родноомаловажавајући вицеви утичу на стварање и ширење родних стереотипа и, ако утичу, да ли ове вицеве треба цензурирати или на њих упозоравати у јавном домену, те да ли је ефекат родне стереотипизације инхерентан овом подтипу хумора или постоје други утичући фактори. Показано је да се родна дискриминација кроз хумор парадоксално испољава као извесна једнакост, где је родноомаловажавајући хумор један од ретких аспеката савременог друштва који изједначава жене и мушкарце, на шта указују многобројни вицеви који омаловажавају оба пола. Из тога произлазе два аргумента: прво, да хумор не подражава стварност у потпуности, те да захтева одређену суспензију стварности ради постизања шаловитог ефекта и, друго, да хумор може да, и уистину, ствара или јача родне стереотипе, али да тај ефекат не треба приписивати самом хумору, већ индивидуалним и друштвено условљеним тумачењима хумористичне интеракције. Други аргумент односи се на налазе психолога да тумачење омаловажавајућег хумора као искључиво механизма шале заправо поспешује толеранцију родне дискриминације, па чак и склоност ка силовању. Ти налази ипак не указују нужно на то да су наведене последице резултат инхерентног својства хумора, из чега следи да је свака потенцијално негативна друштвена последица употребе хумора изазвана индивидуалним и друштвеноусловљеним разликама учесника у личној, групној или институционализованој хумористичној интеракцији.