

Research note

Cultural dimensions and characteristics reflected in Hungarian TED talks

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Abstract

The present paper is aimed at exploring humour and cultural aspects in TED talks recorded at Hungarian independent TEDx standard events. Applying Speck's (1991) humour taxonomy, a corpus of 30 Hungarian language talks have been classified based on Barry & Graca's (2018) humour typology groups and further examined by descriptive statistical indicators. Results show that cultural and other national features are reflected in the talks and are appreciated by the audience. Incongruity and disparagement appeared to be a safe comic device to create laughter in highly individualist and masculine cultures; however, relief-based humour is riskier in high uncertainty avoiding countries, as the message may be interpreted differently than expected.

Keywords: humour taxonomy, Hungarian TED talks, cultural dimensions.

1. Introduction

The present paper is aimed at exploring humour and cultural aspects in TED talks recorded recently at Hungarian independent TEDx standard events. This is part of a larger research project including a comparison of Hungarian TED talks with their international counterparts.

2. TED talks, humour theories and cultural dimensions

TED conferences (founded in 1984 in USA) communicate “Ideas worth spreading” through inspirational talks (TED) with the purpose of disseminating free knowledge. TEDx occasions are licensed, nationally organised events worldwide. All TED(x) talks are recorded and published online and are free to the general public. Present research applies Barry & Graca's framework (2018). Barry and Graca identified eleven humour types as summarised in Figure 1, based on

Speck's (1991) humorous message taxonomy: incongruity, relief (arousal-safety) and superiority (disparagement) theory.

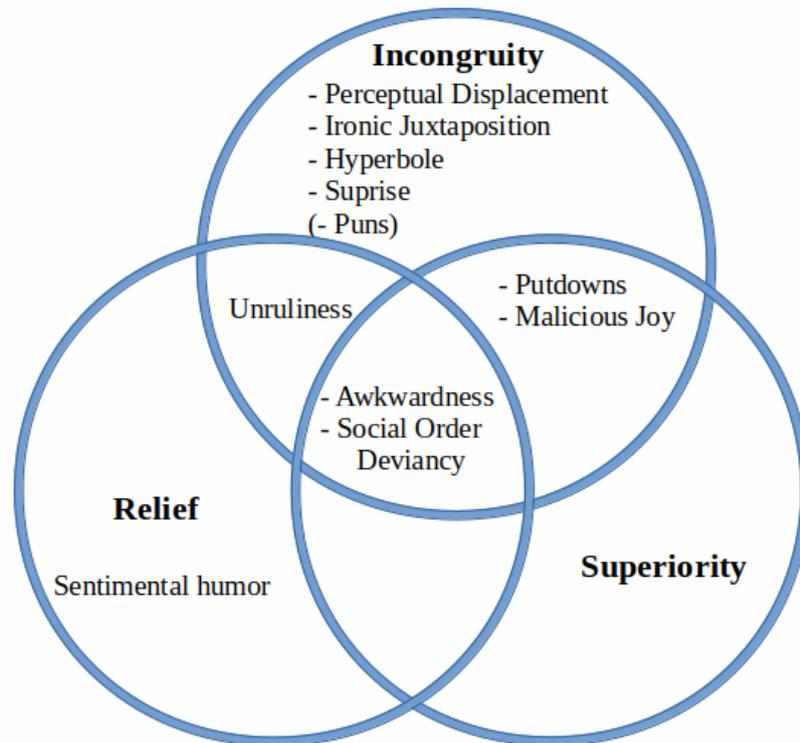


Figure 1. Theory Derived Typology of Humour by Barry & Graca (2018: 60)

One of the most widely known and accepted models for analysing cultural differences is Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimension model, which identifies six dimensions: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, long vs short-term orientation and restraint-indulgence (Hofstede et al. 2010).

Hatzithomas et al. (2011) indicate that cultural diversity is reflected in the humorous devices used in their examined countries. High uncertainty avoiding (UA) cultures feel threatened by uncertainty or ambiguity (Hofstede 1984). Hungary has a rather high value (82 on Hofstede's scale of originally 100). Offensive humour is not favoured by high uncertainty avoiding cultures, and as Beard (2008, cited in Hatzithomas et al. 2011) further suggests, the arousal-safety (relief) process may be perceived as offensive by the audience. Hence, a hypothesis (H1) follows as: *relief-based humour (i.e. sentimental humour) is expected to be low in the Hungarian sample.*

High masculinity cultures are more competitive and prefer achievement (Hofstede 1984). Barry & Graca (2013) found that individualist cultures find disparagement entertaining as opposed to collectivists, who tend to identify with the disparaged person(s); moreover, they added that individual cultures show more interest in aggressive humour such as putdowns. Hungary scores high on both dimensions (80 and 84 respectively); hence, the following hypothesis is formulated: *H2: The researched Hungarian corpus will contain a higher percentage of superiority-based humour types than relief-based ones.*

At the same time, Hatzithomas et al. (2011) found that incongruity-based humour instances in their advertising context are overwhelming (over 85 per cent). Thus a similar context of TED talks is expected to *predominantly contain incongruity-based humour types (i.e. Perceptual Displacement, Ironic Juxtaposition, Hyperbole, Surprise, Puns)* as worded in hypothesis H3.

Hidasi (2018) analysed gender differences in humour creation and concluded that society expects men to be humour “producers”, whereas women are expected to receive humour. This may be due to the traditional male-female role allocation and a male dominant Hungarian society. Hence, *more humour instances will be expected by male than female speakers in the Hungarian TED talk sample* (H4).

As the paper is exploratory, further cultural features or national characteristics are hoped to be reflected in the humour instances.

3. Methods

The analysed corpus consists of 30 Hungarian language TED talks recorded at the official TEDx standard events in 2018 and parts of 2017 and published on YouTube in 2018 and 2019. Although the sample number may seem low, the corpus contains more than 6 hours (365 min) of talk time resulting in more than 45,000 words presented by nearly 50 speakers (some multiple speaker talks) including a high number of scientific results, quotes, personal stories and examples. Thus, a diverse corpus is ensured. The popularity of the sample videos measures about 371,000 views in total (10.12.2019). All the examined talks have been transcribed, and humorous instances have manually been classified into the humour type taxonomy groups summarised in Section 2 and further examined by descriptive statistical indicators.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Humour types

The Hungarian corpus provided 213 humorous instances, which were sorted into the categories suggested by Barry & Graca (2018). As can be seen in Figure 2, the most common humour theory in the corpus is incongruity (see the first five columns in Figure 2). Incongruity accounts for 80 per cent, meaning that most TED speakers applied incongruity-based humour; thus, hypothesis H3 is accepted.

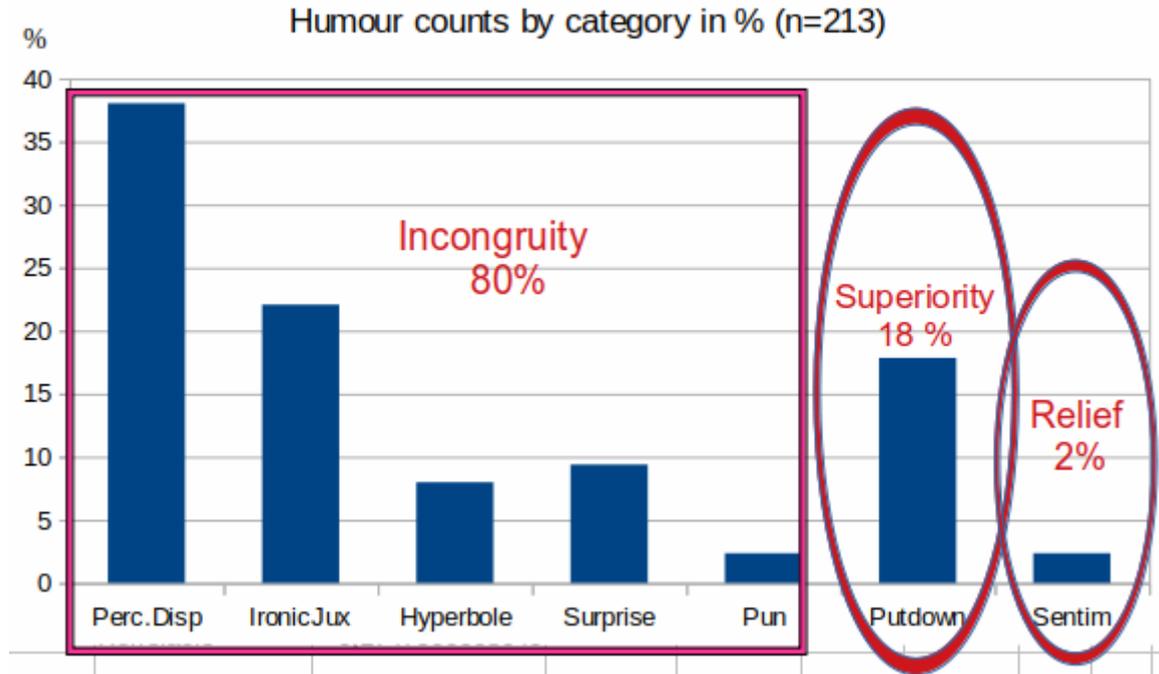


Figure 2. Humour counts by category in % (n=213)

The superiority theory (combined with incongruity), i.e. satires/putdowns, represents 18 per cent of the sample, which is typical of individualistic and masculine cultures (Barry & Graca 2018). In the present case, Hungary, this may be regarded as a culturally specific feature of the Hungarian sample. Hence, we accept H2: *The researched Hungarian corpus contains a higher percentage of superiority-based humour types than relief-based ones.*

The following quote exemplifies a superiority-based humour type: The speaker, a professional photographer, disparages people who turn their back to an interesting sight to take selfies. He shows a humorous picture of a person smiling at the camera on a boat while a whale emerges from the water at the background:

and the most important things do not happen *to us*... but *behind us*.

(Kallo 2018 – translated by the author)

The relief theory (i.e. sentimental humour) accounts for only two per cent, which is in accordance with hypothesis H1: *The researched Hungarian corpus contains a low percentage of relief-based humour types (i.e. sentimental humour)*

Nevertheless, TED talks often contain personal and emotional stories to create credible and memorable messages, e.g. a job advertising TED speaker recounted a story about a department store employee who cooperated in helping a father to persuade his child to give up his pacifier in exchange for a toy (sentimental story for arousal). Then she added:

Now imagine a job advertisement which says: We sell LEGO toys for baby pacifiers. Would you like to join our team?

(Karpati 2018 – translated by the author)

Perceptual displacement (38%) and irony (22%) harmonise with the TED talks' focus on cognitive mental processes. TED speakers are encouraged to illustrate their messages by adding (personal)

stories. Therefore, a number of surprises with a short storyline appear in the corpus. For example, a coach recounts her experience living in Italy, ending it in a surprise:

I moved there thinking I would never want to return home. Because the weather is much nicer there, the sea is beautiful, meals are delicious and people are cheerful. Then I lived there for one and a half years and I realised that all of this ... is true.

(Bagi 2018 – translated by the author)

Regarding gender differences, TED organisers try to select an approximately equal number of male and female speakers (58 and 42 per cent respectively in this corpus). Humorous instances were 68 and 32 per cent respectively, i.e. an average talk by a male contained 8.44 instances of humour whereas talks by females contained 5.82 instances. Hence, hypothesis *H2: More humour instances are presented by male than female speakers in the Hungarian TED talk sample* is accepted.

4.2. Humour depicting specific Hungarian cultural or national features

Irony, hyperbole and satire as comic devices are applied in describing national characteristics or situations. Hungarians are famous for being overly *pessimistic*, which is clearly reflected in the idiom “*Sírva vigad a magyar*” (“Hungarians enjoy themselves while weeping”—translated by the author) and is openly manifested in a talk about the Hungarian past and future as presented by a university professor:

and I want to talk about this special Hungarian added *unhappiness* which at the same time makes us so happy. It is just hidden to foreigners.

Of course, we got more horrors after the war, our history is rich in this aspect. We can compete with our parents in this regard: Who had more horrors in life?

(Csepeli 2018 – translated by the author)

Sadly, Hungary is among the top five countries of the European Union to suffer from a high rate of cardiovascular diseases (Eurostat 2017). A clinical researcher presenting a new way of early diagnosis of cancer mentions satirically that:

But what can *we* do in Hungary? (...) All we have is the sad statistics.

(Berces 2018 – translated by the author)

The sample contains a TED talk which is dedicated to disparaging the male dominant Hungarian society. The male speaker ironically tells the female speaker, who is a renowned researcher regularly presenting at international conferences:

Yes, Andrea, we will think you are here only because you are either somebody’s girlfriend or you have a good PR manager.

(Fekete & Doffek 2018 – translated by the author).

5. Conclusion, practical implications and limitation

Although the corpus is limited to only 30 talks from Hungarian TEDx events, it shows valuable information to the present exploratory research. The analysis shows that cultural features are

reflected in the talks and are appreciated by the audience, since humour based on national characteristics, common history and social rituals effectively creates an accepting audience behaviour. Incongruity is a safe comic device to create laughter; nevertheless, relief-based humour in high UA countries might be unsafe, as the message may be interpreted differently than expected. Further research is necessary to ensure the generalisability of the research. Examining Hofstede's (1984) other cultural dimensions may reveal more culture-bound humour instances in a similar corpus.

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