

Book review

Davies, C. (2011). *Jokes and Targets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Paperback, 314 pp

Christie Davies' most recent contribution to the academic study of humour concerns once again the rules that govern target choice in folkloric jokes. His book *Jokes and Targets* sets out to give falsifiable explanations to how joke cycles come about and why particular groups of people rather than others become the targets of these jokes. To complement his previous studies, he focuses on non-ethnic targets (blondes, men having sex with men, lawyers, the totalitarian Soviet Union) and jokes about sexuality (concerning the French as well as the Jews) to extend the validity of his social and historical argumentation initially designed to describe stupidity jokes (Davies 1990) and later other stereotypical ethnic targets (e.g. Davies 1998). The six chapters of this book, framed by the most enlightening introductory and closing passages, are followed by 23 pages of references and an index.

In order to understand where *Jokes and Targets* stems from, we have to go back to his previous works on humour. Since the late 1970s, Christie Davies has published four monographs and a great number of articles on humour, many of which have become landmarks in the study of ethnic jokes. In the course of time, he has developed his theories into a well-grounded framework that can be seen as a starting point for those who are only entering the field as well as those already established in their research. The present book draws together his insight and experience in studying ethnic humour. As he mentions in a recent interview, “[*Jokes and Targets*] is much broader in scope [than previous publications] and deals with jokes about professions and social classes, sex jokes, and political jokes which were not in the earlier books. This one is comprehensive” (Indiana University Press Blog 2011). This is true in many ways: not only does this book refer back to previously valid models in order to elaborate on their details, it also touches on other issues that are pervasive in his works, e.g. the functions of and aggression in jokes (developed in greater detail in Davies 2002). The subject matter of *Jokes and Targets* was first outlined in the book *Ethnic Humour around the World* (1990). In his first study of ethnic humour, which has become a frequently cited classic, Davies maintains that ethnic jokes about stupidity are dependent on three factors: 1) geographical (centre versus periphery), 2) linguistic and cultural (the target usually speaks an outdated or relict version of the same language as the joke-teller), and 3) economical (joke-teller has higher living standards than the target). On the basis of this, testable hypotheses concerning different ethnic groups that can become objects of ridicule could further be postulated.

Throughout his work, he stresses the importance of appropriate methodology and points out possible pitfalls. In particular, he warns from underestimating the task and reducing the existence of jokes to arbitrary common sense explanations, without giving sufficient proof or possibilities of falsification (p. 2). To set down another positive example himself, the author's present study is based on his thorough sociological research, venturing at times into literary, folkloristic, or historical studies. He succeeds once again to provide even better explanations for jokes and cycles, approaching his task by analysing jokes from two main aspects already familiar from his previous works: first of all, what is specific to the place and the time that the

jokes are told in, and secondly, why the same kind of jokes were not told in other similar contexts. In an academically elegant prose, he guides the reader through the material, furnishing the path with plenty of colourful examples from various genres but, above all, jokes. To those familiar with his style, it comes as no surprise that subtle pieces of humour like “But it is time to leave beauty altogether and turn to the French” (p. 76) wait for the careful reader, casually scattered into the text.

The joke targets chosen for this study form a seemingly accidental set. But the inherent underlying aspect that unites them is that the proliferation of these joke butts did not get a snugly fitting explanation before: they formed cases where the existence (or lack of) jokes as social facts was not totally accounted by their surrounding social reality. It becomes clear by the end of the book that questions such as “Why do joke tellers in many North American and European countries tell jokes about blondes being stupid and about the French taking too great an interest in sex?” (p. 1) or “What lies behind humour at the expense of sport and sportsmen?” (p. 137) are not so different after all.

The first chapter “Mind over matter” overarches the book by outlining the theory, whereas the following chapters add valuable details and insight. Starting with a concise introduction that covers the methodological tools in use and defines the main object of research and its sources, Davies continues by stopping on each of the aforementioned targets, intricately cross-referencing between the chapters to further clarify his point: how a few rules may explain the majority of cases. Elaborating on his previous statements on stupidity jokes and their direction, he formulates the hypothesis that we tend to laugh at the more material and earthy over the more ethereal and mental (p. 20–68). This covers the blank spots in his previous models, as jokes are not always about power and lack of it; the direction of laughter can be bottom-up as well as top-down, etc. In the present theory of mind-over-matter, the mind and the body form a pair of opposites, and excesses in the use of either result in communal laughter. On the one hand, jokes are prone to evolve when power is based on the force of physicality (p. 31) as shown in the plenty of examples of jokes about stupid militias, dictators, aristocrats, marines, orthopaedic surgeons, or athletes. So, he concludes, stupidity jokes rely, above all, on the contrast between the body and the mind. The occupations (or groups of people) associated with the material world are most likely to be cast as stupid. On the other hand, intelligence can also be laughable, especially when it is put to work for attaining rewards in a morally questionable way (which is shown in the case study of lawyer jokes in Chapter 5).

A majority of the chosen targets seek to illuminate this line of thought. The second chapter, focusing on “Blondes, sex and the French”, combines two quite different examples, both excessively associated with sexuality. Blond jokes cycle derives from an entrenched disposition to think of blondes as sexually more attractive than red-heads or brunettes, which leads to a stereotype of them being sexually available, i.e. ready to surrender to bodily urges rather than calculative thought. A different example is presented by jokes about the French, the roots of which lie much deeper in the history, vested in the asymmetries of trade and travel: the pre-First World War Western erotic literature and art came prominently from France, and sex tourism was also asymmetrical in favour of this country. Even if there is no actual support for the stereotype after the Second World War, the tradition is still alive, feeding on its strong and distinctive roots.

Opposite to this, jokes that the Jews tell about their own nation and, more specifically, their women, stress qualities that express self-control and self-preservation. In the third chapter entitled “Jewish Women and Jewish Men”, Davies continues with his argument, moving from explaining the excessive sexuality of blonde jokes to humour about the asexual

Jewish women. This forms a perfect link in his line of argument where the excess use of mind can be as funny as being ascribed to having no intelligence at all.

The fourth chapter addressing masculinity (entitled “Sex between Men”) provides a difficult case to analyse. The chapter is full of intrinsic details which display various sub-patterns within the model of “the mind versus the body”. It would have been illuminating to read more about how the tendency to choose a male target for sex-related jokes, depicting them as being penetrated by another man, works in the framework of the overarching mind-body dichotomy, because in some ways it even contradicts the base of the theory by letting the body (masculine strength and determination) take victory over mind (by depicting the educated, well-off social classes as effeminate, or as targets of male penetration).

Sometimes the reason to laugh at some targets is brought about by something else than their deliberate over-thinking. Lawyers, as Davies explains, are most probably laughed at because they tend to use their intelligence in a way that is beneficial only to them, without any evidence left for their clients to prove this, as described in the fifth chapter “The Great American Lawyer Joke Cycle”. Thus, it is quite understandable why jokes about lawyers, real estate agents, and bankers become especially popular during times of economical crises: the representatives of these professions are selling their services to people in trouble, but their work is not tangible (hence, representing the mind rather than the body), and their real economic contribution is opaque. This makes them a perfect target for jokes about craftiness. Again, the starting point is contrasting the material with the ethereal. The important question is why the cycle is so inherent to the American culture, and even if the jokes have travelled, they have remained the same, i.e. they have been translated, but not adapted any further. The answer, as Davies prompts, lies in the distinctly American virtues of free speech, legal rights, individualism, and the American dream.

The last target in the book is the Soviet society as a whole. “The Rise of the Soviet Joke” addresses the jokes that were told under the Soviet totalitarian regime. In the sixth chapter, he strays quite far from the overarching model (which, intuitively, would mean blaming the physicality and brute force of the totalitarian power – versus intellectual power – for causing the jokes to spread and proliferate), and instead elaborates on his thesis of jokes being a thermometer, not a thermostat. He continues by sketching a thorough historical background to the jokes in order to answer the intriguing question about the effect of jokes as such: did the jokes have a marked effect on this particular system and, subsequently, cause its collapse? Could the collapse have been predicted through the existence of these jokes? Davies concludes that although metaphors such as “wit is a weapon” persist, humour possesses no straightforward power to bring down a political system. Humour does, however, help to understand and judge the system from inside, which is why paying attention to jokes, as well as knowing where they come from and what patterns they display, may lead to unusual but truthful insights into the societies that have produced the jokes.

The conclusive chapter presents an invaluable lesson of theory construction and refutation, as Davies draws together his model which is designed to account for many phenomena in terms of a few variables. He outlines all of his theories on jokes and targets (namely the models of centre-over-periphery, monopoly-over-competition, and finally mind-over-matter), explaining where the need to expand and elaborate on them has stemmed from, and how new comparisons and material have forced him to re-formulate his stance. The mind-over-matter model, a follow-up to the previous models (first described in Davies 1990), indeed accounts for the insufficiencies that his former theory has displayed: for example, answering the question of why aristocrats would be depicted as stupid in British jokes, or why athletes or orthopaedic surgeons are frequent targets of stupidity jokes.

Davies offers an elegant and simple model (yet not too simple, as the good-over-bad dichotomy), providing the reader with ample illustrations on the way. However, he does not wholly neglect the initial theories, which, as he states, “taken together, [...] explain more than any one of them does on its own” (p 264). *Jokes and Targets* is an excellent piece of scholarship which should be read by novices and established academics alike, and which will continue to excite, inspire, and surprise the audience even after several rounds of reading.

Liisi Laineste

Estonian Literary Museum, Taru, Estonia

References

- Davies, C. 1990. *Ethnic Humour around the World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Davies, C. 1998. *Jokes and their Relation to the Society*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Davies, C. 2002. *The Mirth of Nations*. New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers.
- Indiana University Press Blog (2011, July 11). Interview with C. Davies. <http://iupress.typepad.com/blog/2011/07/author-interview-christie-davies-jokes-and-targets.html> (accessed 15 April 2012).