

琉球大学学術リポジトリ

An Analysis of Humour Types in Translated Versions of Gaelic Proverbs.

メタデータ	言語: 出版者: 琉球大学法文学部国際言語文化学科欧米系 公開日: 2009-07-13 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12000/11148

An Analysis of Humour Types in Translated Versions of Gaelic Proverbs.

Kate O'Callaghan

The utilization of proverbs begins with a situation that lends itself to the application of one. Their appearance in conversation is primarily a reactive speech act on the part of the speaker. Being situated outside an active living language area, this researcher will rely on proverb compilations for sourcing and discussing elements of humour in translated versions of Gaelic proverbs.

Using three principle collections of Gaelic proverbs for this study and excluding repetition and variations about 600 proverbs were encountered. Some of these are instantly recognizable and have English equivalents. It is always hard to say which version came first and which way the transfer occurred. According to Robinson (1945) transfer from English into Irish makes proverbs “newer” while transfer from Gaelic into English dates the proverbs further back in time.

There are several factors that make a proverb funny and this paper will attempt to loosely classify their types as a means to organize the research. There are two main categories of humour within the body of proverbs studied and under these types, a few sub categories. The first group items were divided into was the **Content** group (interior features). Entries to this section rely on devices within the proverb to make them funny. The second group relies on **external situations** or **factors** (exterior features) to make the proverb humourous. The second category while more common place requires a degree of spontaneity and it is the quick wittedness of the speaker that makes the proverb funny in a given

circumstance.

CONTENT GROUP: Internal Factors

Within the Content group there are several sub categories which proverbs can fall under. The first and most obvious feature of a funny proverb is the pragmatic mechanism which underlies it, plain and simple, it is the language used that creates the humour. The strange or unusual images portrayed by its words are usually outside the framework or perception of human experience. In humour studies this is known as Incongruity theory.

Do not keep your tongue under your belt: Don't be shy, voice your opinion.

A Sweet voice doesn't injure the teeth: Speaking kindly does not cause any harm whereas speaking in anger may get you into a fight.

He comes in like the bad weather, uninvited: Commentary about unwanted guests.

The next proverb adheres well to modern day Politically Correct (PC) standards. The basis of which considers it offensive to speak directly about societal groups which may have unique qualities that set them apart from other members of the same society. The proverb eloquently says: *His feeding has been better than his education*, meaning he is not only fat but stupid too. A double slander if you will.

While groupings of three are common in all languages the triads of Ireland have gained renown as they are particularly abundant. They usually take the form of comparing three things and might be known better today as the "top 3 [insert noun]". In Ireland they have gained popularity because of their proverbial nature and within that realm, humorous triads abound.

Three diseases without shame: Love, itch, and thirst.

This statement means that a person who is affected by these “diseases” does not have the restraint to hide their “affliction”. This apothegm relies on two sources for its humour. The first is reference to ‘love’ as a disease and the second requires a look through pragmatic lenses. “Thirst” is often used figuratively to refer to imbibing alcohol.

There are a plethora of proverbs commenting on the sharpness, strength and power of women’s tongues and their tendency to overuse them. Here is an offering in triad form.

*Three things that will never rust,- a woman’s tongue, the shoes of a
butcher’s horse and charitable folks money.*

The “rust” in this proverb relies on the knowledge that if something is unused it gathers rust. The second item in this triad “the shoes of a butcher’s horse” is mentioned because if or when a butcher has the habit of changing his horse there is no time for rust to appear on the shoes. The inference of a “butcher” constantly changing his horse has the underhand suggestion that he is using it for his trade, and selling the meat. Horsemeat was not considered suitable for human consumption but rather “filler” for animal feed. So the fact that the butcher is changing the horse so often and possibly using the meat as filler, possibly unbeknownst to the customer, is a slur on the profession. The “money” item of this proverb is that money is always used as soon as it is given to charity because charity cases are always in desperate need of money, so there is no lapse of time between receiving and spending it.

And the last one for this section; *Three kinds of men who fail to understand women: young men, old men and middle aged men.* This is fairly self-explanatory!

Another component of proverbs that stand alone in their humour because of their content, is personification within those sayings. Parker

(1945) describes Spanish proverbs as having this factor and compares the Spanish *Mas cerca estan mis dientes que mis parientes*. (My teeth are closer than my relatives) to the English: *Charity begins at home*. While the latter is abstract the former pulls the listener in and allows them to create an image in their minds for the proverb or even personally relate to it. Gaelic has several offerings employing this technique. One of which needs a little background information. The expression ‘to take a turn out of a person’ means to unexpectedly leave them surprised or speechless. The next proverb uses this expression in a humourous way

Death has many ways of taking a turn out of person.

This is humourous because it gives “death” human capabilities. It personifies death and gives it the ability to wittingly shock or do something unexpected. It is true there are so many ways to die and one is literally left speechless when death occurs. But the “take a turn out of a person” usually implies a witness to the reaction when something surprising has occurred. Being ‘dead’ forfeits that visual display of the victim and would rather transfer it to the witness.

Proverbs that can be taken literally as good advice or counsel can sometimes cloak their message in humour like the aforementioned ‘Sweet voice not injuring the teeth’ proverb. It is another form of humour that arises when the proverb can be understood at two discursive planes:

God never ordained a mouth to be without food.

At first glance this does not seem a particularly funny. Upon looking a little bit closer we see that it is a proverb that can be interpreted at two levels. The first, the ‘face value level’, assumes the meaning of “ordained” to be commanded or intended, rendering it: ‘God dictated that nobody should go hungry’. The second level interpretation employs ordained in its religious use and manifests an underlying mocking tone

directed toward the clergy. A priest's job is a stable livelihood and therefore a position in which personal hunger isn't a worry. When understood at the second level this proverb loses a facet of its proverbiality because while the first metaphorical interpretation can be employed in various circumstances to include many kinds of people the latter can only be used to refer directly to the members of the priesthood or those intending to join.

Proverbs presenting social rivalries are considered funny by the common bond of belonging to one of the groups. Groups of people within society having perceived rivalries often make the "other" group the butt of their jokes. These rivalries may be a result of being on the opposite end of the social spectrum or fighting for the same place on it. This type of humour usually depends on putting the other group in a lower or less fortunate light and is known as Superiority theory. An example of the former would be the rich and the poor and the latter doctors and lawyers. In Irish there are quite a few of these disdainful proverbs about the clergy *Be neither intimate nor distant with the clergy*. This "rivalry" extends to nationality too a small number of which are racist. The Irish have a history of strife with the British so it stands to reason that there are proverbs in Gaelic that don't show the British in the best light.

Four things which an Irishman ought not to trust, - a cow's horn, a horse's hoof, a dog's snarl and an Englishman's laugh.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Situational humour: The pragmatic context in which the proverb is uttered is potentially the largest contributive factor to its humour. And it is usually the spontaneity of its appearance which infuses a simple saying with comedic value. When a person uses a proverb in this way

they often don't use the complete saying. The proverb is frequently changed in one of three ways. ①The speaker uses just the first part of the proverb, for example "Still waters" to refer to still waters run deep. ②Saying just the key element of the proverb: "horse to water" and not the whole saying. In this case it needs to be absurdly obvious so the situation provides a backdrop for the proverb otherwise this proves to be an exercise in futility. One can't simply utter "cat" and expect the listener to make the quantum leap to "A cat may look at a king", the listener must be able to immediately recognise the speaker's reference to a source proverb. ③The proverb is rephrased in a rhetorical question; A beautiful lady and a not so handsome man walk by holding hands one person leans over and says to their companion "Well you know what they say about 'love'?" inferring the proverb "*Love is blind*"

Vocal tone and body gestures: Other outside tools used to inject a proverb with humour. *It is not to everyone God gives cleverness.* Said in sympathetic tones this literal meaning can be one of genuine concern but for the most part this will be said with eyes raised to heaven in a condescending tone revealing the speakers attempt at derision of something stupid he/she witnessed.

Twisted humour: As Mieder (2002) says, proverbs that use this device to glean laughs rely on their recognisability. They are well known sayings and use this familiarity within society as a springboard from which to contort original sentiments. It is these types of proverbs that marketers use in advertising campaigns and cartoonists have their puns based on. They substitute one word, section or even simply a letter, reverse the content or add a statement. These entries were considered for the first section because it is essentially what the proverb contains that is under discussion, however because the substitution or added word are "extra" and are added from outside it was decided to classify them

under external features.

Substituting one word or section for another can often result in funny consequences. *All work and no play makes..... you a valued employee.* The subjacent proverb of course being: *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.* **Reversing the content** within the proverb: *Every cloud has a sliver lining* becomes *Every sliver lining has a cloud around it.* Quoting the proverb as it reads in its entirety and then **adding a statement** which modifies the meaning in a funny way. *Love is blind¹ - and marriage is an eye-opener* or *Love is blind - but the neighbours aren't.*

This section is short as the proverbs used were employed for demonstrative purposes and while the source proverb has appeared as a translated version of a Gaelic offering the element that makes it humorous was taken from an English source. As mentioned earlier proverbs used in this paper have come from lists and have not been gathered in fieldwork. The advantage of this style is that all proverbs are conveniently presented over a few volumes however the drawback is not encountering the sayings in their natural setting - a conversation.

Wellerisms are another tangent off the concept of adding a statement. They usually take a proverb or cliché and then have a named speaker add a twist to it e.g. *Life is sweet - said the tailor running from the gander.* Liam Mac Con Iomaire gives example of a few wellerisms in Gaelic. "*Walk straight, my son*"- *as the old crab said to the young crab.* Or "*A big voice with very little wool*" *as the devil/adversary said to the pig he was shearing*². The humour lies in the irony of the speaker uttering those words.

Subjectivity: A sense of humour is to an individual like a fingerprint,

¹ Found in Gaelic proverb compilations but not originally Gaelic I believe.

unique. There are arguments that attempt to justify the belief that different nationalities have different senses of humour but this then relies on stereotypes created by impressions of people not laughing at the same things - British comedians often make jokes about the Germans not having a sense of humour. Yet this is not to say that Germans don't laugh, they just find different things funny. In fact, in a quest to find the world's funniest joke Dr. Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire revealed that amongst Europeans the Germans laughed the most and the British came in three places behind in fourth position. Saying a nationality has a certain sense of humour also assumes that everyone of that nationality would laugh at the same thing.

This is unsteady ground to base a theory of national humour on as like the aforementioned social groups, different generations within the same nationality may find different situations or stories funny. Subjectivity is a universal category that straddles the two principle classifications set out in this paper; Proverb Content and External Factors. This is because regardless of all elements employed by the proverb to elicit a laugh, at the end of the day if the intended audience laughs then the proverb is humourous. Unfortunately this is not such an open and shut case. Is it the listener's reaction to the proverb... a laugh.... that classifies it as funny? "A san" may laugh therefore the proverb is funny, "B san" has no reaction so is the proverb funny or not? The proverbs selected for this paper were because of the writer's personal view of what is funny, another researcher may have chosen a different set. Subjectivity is the most elusive of descriptions of humour yet it affects each category.

² 2. Ibid

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Champion S.G.(1963) *Racial Proverbs*. Barnes and Noble, NY.
- Doctor, R.. “Mutant Proverbs in Shaggy Dog Stories”. *Proverbium* 12:1995 (119-139)
- Flanagan, L.(1995). *Irish Proverbs*. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin
- Mac Con Iomaire, L. (1995). *Ireland of the Proverb* Roberts Rinehart Publishers, CO.
- Mieder, W, Litovkina, A. (2002) *Twisted Humor: Modern Anti-proverbs*. DeProverbio, Hobart
- Morris, H., (1963) Introduction to the Proverbs of Ireland. In Champion S.G. *Racial Proverbs*.
- Okutsu, F., (2000) 日英ことわざの比較文化, 大修館書店.
- O’Rahilly, T.F. (1921) *Danfhocail:Irish Epigrams in verse*. Comlucht an Talboidig Dublin.
- O’Rahilly, T.F. (1922) *A Miscellany of IrishProverbs*. The Talbot press, Dublin.
- Parker, A.A., (1962) “The Humour of Spanish Proverbs”. In W.Mieder and A. Dundes. *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*, NY 1981
- Robinson F.N.,(1945) “Irish Proverbs and Irish National Character”. (284-299)
- Taylor, A. (1962) *The Proverb*. Pennsylvania Folklore associates.
- Todd, L. (2000) *Green English*. O’Brien press, Dublin.
- “Europe’s funniest Nation revealed”.
- <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/12/20/britain.laughter/index.html>