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**SEXISM IN ENGLISH JOKES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF PLAYBOY'S PARTY JOKES AND THAT'S LIFE!'S RUDE JOKES**

К. МАГДЗЯЖ (ОПОЛЕ, ПОЛЬША). СЕКСИЗМ В АНГЛИЙСКИХ АНЕКДОТАХ. Многие исследователи юмора в качестве материала исследования часто выбирают шутки, бытующие в Интернете. Анекдоты, публикуемые в журналах, остаются малоизученными. Кроме того, до сих пор не проводилось исследований, посвященных репрезентации мужчин и женщин в женских и мужских журналах. В данной статье делается попытка сравнения анекдотов, публикуемых в женских и мужских журналах. Особое внимание уделяется лингвистическим сигналам сексизма в анекдотах. Основываясь на идее о том, что анекдот является формой дискурса, данное исследование демонстрирует, как в журналах создаются образы обоих полов.

Ключевые слова: сексизм, юмор, общая теория вербального юмора, сексистский юмор, феминистский юмор, лингвистический сексизм, журналы

K. MAGDZIARZ. SEXISM IN ENGLISH JOKES (OPOLE, POLAND). While analysing jokes, most researchers focus on the Internet-based humour. Jokes published in magazines seem to present an understudied area. Additionally, there is no study that would focus on representation of both women and men in magazines for both men and women. Therefore, this article aims to compare jokes from stereotypical female and male magazines, focusing on the presence of linguistic sexism in the jokes. Moreover, assuming that jokes may be conceptualised as a form of discourse, this study also aims to present the images of both sexes that are created by the magazines.

Keywords: sexism, humour, GTVH, sexist humour, feminist humour, linguistic sexism, magazines

1. Introduction

For a relatively long period of time now it has been claimed that sexism, being a form of discrimination based on sex/gender differences, may be reflected in a language. Therefore, sexist language has been identified as defining, depreciating and ignoring one of the

sexes (or genders; most often women, though) (Henley 1987; Weatherall 2002). However, because of the severe criticism sexist language has received, many of the forms and terms labelled as sexist are no longer in use (in public discourses, at least). But, the problem of sexist language has not disappeared; its forms have become more covert. Thus, following Sara Mills (2008), today linguistic sexism may be classified as overt, i. e. concerning all of the forms and terms thoroughly described by the feminist movement, and indirect, i. e. occurring in a particular context, at the level of metaphors and presuppositions, and very often covered by irony and humour. In this article the main focus is put on indirect sexism, since this type of linguistic sexism is present in the media most often. However, in order to make the study as complete as possible, attention to direct form of sexism is also given.

The main objective of this article is to verify the claim that the language of jokes of both men's and women's magazines is sexist. Because of the nature of PLAYBOY magazine, it is assumed that jokes mainly about women are to be found in *Party Jokes*. Similarly, because of the nature of THAT'S LIFE! magazine, jokes mainly about men are expected to be found in *Rude Jokes*. In addition, claiming that jokes may be a form of discourse, this study also aims to provide answers to the question of what images of women and men are created in the jokes of men's and women's magazines.

2. Sexism and language

Sexism is usually defined as a form of discrimination on the grounds of sex (and/or gender) (Lind 2007). Although some researchers on sexism claim that the basis of sexism is sex (and not gender), the author of this article assumes, after Judith Butler (1990), that sex and gender should be conceptualised as interconnected and indivisible. While in the past the two were separated, claiming that gender is social and cultural construct constituting masculinities and femininities and sex is biological characteristic marking humans as females or males (Cameron 2006), it seems that sex and gender are not as distinct as it might occur. Therefore, sexism is both an action and an attitude, behaviour, policy and language in which views and believes that one sex (gender) is inferior to other are visible, thus endorsing traditional stereotyping and gender roles (Brant, Mynatt &

Doherty 1999; Glick & Fiske 1997). This definition shall be considered as the working definition, since it encompasses all the elements being crucial for the purpose of this article. Moreover, it should be stressed out that the author of this paper believes that both males and females may engage in sexist discrimination as well as may be the victims of such a discrimination¹. Also, it is important to note that sexism should not be conceptualised with negative aspects only. By introducing the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, Peter Glick and Suzan Fiske (1999) propose the coexistence of both negative and positive affects, differentiating between hostile and benevolent sexism. Therefore, hostile forms of sexism include subjectively negative stereotyping resulting in justification (or criticism) of men's dominance (e. g. by describing women as too weak or men as too aggressive), whereas benevolent forms of sexism include subjectively positive stereotyping resulting in beliefs and attitudes related to interdependencies of the sexes (e. g. because of men's strength, men should protect women, or women should take care of men because men are like little children). Moreover, sexism may be used in many different forms, not only visible and straightforward but also in more subtle and hidden ways. Thus, some differentiate overt (blatant) sexism and covert and subtle sexism (Brant, Mynatt & Doherty 1999; Swim & Cohen 1997). Overt sexism is connected with any visible and intentional treatment of sexes that is differential, unequal, unfair and/or harmful. These include differences in payment in the same positions or physical or verbal abuse. Covert sexism is also intentional, but unlike overt sexism, is clandestine and hidden. This may include any type of behaviour that leads to undermining one's achievements and showing their place. Subtle sexism is also hidden, but unlike overt or covert sexism, is not intentional. It is so ingrained in society and perceived as a norm that one may be unaware of involving in such a discriminatory behaviour.

Taking all of the above into consideration, sexist language is a language that would represent women and men in a biased manner, overtly or subtly, intentionally and unintentionally, favouring one sex/gender over another.

¹ Still, it is a fact that women are most often to be discriminated against. Moreover, some may argue that men being a majority group, i. e. those who, historically and politically, have been in power, can not be considered to be discriminated against (Mills 2008).

3. Media and humour

It is claimed that media play an important role in constructing identities. Text producers construct imaginary audiences, addressees to whom texts are directed. These audiences are characterised by some implied values (implied for the needs of given paper). Additionally, text producers create their personae in order to become a member of the group or community they target and thus minimise social distance. These practices make texts appear more approachable and personalised (Talbot 2007).

One such technique of minimising distance and creating social bonds concerns using humour. For instance, it is argued that magazines dedicated for men are soaked with humour and irony (sometimes referred to as pathological). It appears not only in forms of traditional jokes or cartoons but is present in articles or letters-from-readers sections. In the former, humour also works as an indicator of norms, making fun of what is different or strange. In the latter, humour is used in a form of banter, a teasing type of conversation typical for men (Benwell 2001). As Antony Easthope observes, "it works as a way of affirming the bond of love between men while appearing to deny it" (cited in Benwell 2001: 21). Moreover, irony and humour is used as a blanket to cover more serious matters, such as relationship or health advice. It is claimed that men generally do not like reading articles giving advice, that they do not want to be told what to do and how to do it because "they like to feel they know best already" (Gauntlett 2002: 167) Therefore, humour may also work as a shield protecting men from the feeling that they need to be advised.

4. Jokes about sexes

Although gender (or sexist) humour has been studied for many years now, little has been said when it comes to any specific definitions. Rather, the attention directed into studying this form of humour has focused either on the appreciation of such humour by different social groups (Shifman & Ma'apil Versano 2007) or on consequences of such humour (Woodzicka & Ford 2010). Therefore, following Limor Shifman and colleagues (Shifman & Lemish 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Shifman & Ma'apil Versano 2007), gender humour may be divided into sexist, feminist and post-feminist humour. Sexist jokes may be either generalized, i.e. mocking women as a "unified collective"

or specified, i. e. mocking certain subgroups of women such as mothers-in-law or blondes. Both forms of sexist humour play on stereotypes, however in a different way. Generalized sexist jokes are based on stereotypes that reflect patriarchal construct of society, in which women are linked with nature (e.g. raising children) and private sphere. In specified sexist humour, on the other hand, the mockery is directed only to some particular female subgroups. In such a case, the stereotypes used in specified sexist jokes are not always associated with women in general, making it difficult to label these kind of jokes sexist: "I'm not offended by all these dumb blonde jokes because I know I'm not dumb. I'm also not blond" (Dolly Parton, cited in Shifman & Lemish 2010b: 21).

Feminist humour, on the other hand, questions traditional stereotyping and patriarchal construction of society often by putting men in stereotypical women situations and thus targeting men. Hence, this type of humour may be perceived as a response to sexist humour or another tool of empowerment, since it aims at exposing and criticising the unfair treatment of sexes, showing how ridiculous it is (Shifman & Lemish 2010a).

Finally, probably the most problematic and the most recent type of gender humour, post-feminist humour may be characterised as a combination of the two above-mentioned. It is the most problematic since not much has been said about post-feminist humour and post-feminism itself. It is still unclear what post-feminism stands for. Some sources describe post-feminism as a new wave of feminism, the so-called "life-style feminism" enabling feminists to be both empowered and feminine, while other sources describe post-feminism as a backlash of feminist, criticising the focus on natural sex differences, consumerism and beauty image, which undermines feminist's achievements. Therefore, basing on these definitions Shifman and Lemish (2010a) characterise post-feminist humour as "Mars vs Venus humour", referring to John Gray's book. This type of humour reaches to the idea of essential (and natural) differences between men and women, very often putting along and contrasting the sexes. Women and men, although seen as two opposites, are different in an equal manner, i.e. both men and women are equally scorned and mocked in such jokes. Sometimes, however, post-feminist jokes draws upon the idea of empowerment, presenting women as manipulative "bitches" using their sexuality as a means of obtaining power.

5. GTVH

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Raskin and Attardo is one of the most important and most influential theory of humour. It is based on the notion of scripts, i.e. a large and organised chunk of information evoked by a lexical item (Attardo 1994); for instance, words *patient* and *illness* may evoke the DOCTOR script. Central to this theory is the idea of opposing scripts (incongruities) and logical mechanism (resolution of incongruities). A text may be classified as a joke only if there may be found two (or more) different scripts and the scripts are opposing and overlapping (Attardo 1994). Logical mechanism *accounts for the way in which the two senses (scripts, isotopies, ...) in the joke are brought together* (Attardo 1994: 225). Although there have been identified many logical mechanisms, all of them may be classified into two categories, i.e. correct reasoning and faulty reasoning. Here, correct means that in the limited domain of the joke the reasoning is perfectly logical, whereas faulty, even in the limit of the joke it still is illogical (Attardo, Hempelmann & Di Maio 2002). Apart from logical mechanism and script opposition, there are other factors, named knowledge resources, which should be taken into consideration while analysing humour. These are: the target (or the butt of the joke) which may contain the names of individuals or groups with stereotypical features attached to them (not every joke has its target); the situation, which is all the *props*, the setting (while for some jokes the situation is crucial, for others it is not of much importance); the narrative strategy, i.e. the form of presenting the joke as a narrative, riddle, dialogue or something else; and the language, i.e. the way of telling the joke, of wording and placing the functional elements (e.g. the punch line) (Attardo 1994).

6. The data and analysis

For the purpose of this study, two magazines have been selected, each one being the most extreme representative for each target audience. Therefore, the PLAYBOY magazine has been conceptualized as a typical men's magazine and the THAT'S LIFE! magazine has been conceptualized as a typical women's magazine. These assumptions has been made basing on the information given by the publishers and circulation numbers, making the two magazines representative. Moreover, the two magazines perfectly fit into the stereotype of a

typical reader. Men, being obsessed with sex, would choose PLAYBOY, a pornographic magazine, while women, being chatterboxes, would choose THAT'S LIFE!, a gossip magazine.

The study covered issues from 2010. A total number of 174 various jokes have been collected. A relatively significant number (155) of these concern jokes about women and men (terms similar to "man" and "woman" have been found in these). The remaining number (19) concerns jokes about rednecks, politicians, or sex and marriage.

Although claimed to appear least often, direct linguistic sexism still appears in the jokes of both magazines, most often in PLAYBOY, though. About ten percent of all jokes include examples of either asymmetrical usage of male and female terms or usage of sex-specific terms in contexts where the sex of the character is not of much importance for the sake of the funniness, e.g.

1) *One evening a man and his wife were sitting in the living room when the husband turned to her and said, "Honey, I never want to live in a vegetative state, dependent on some machine and fluids from a bottle. If that ever happens, promise me you'll just pull the plug."*

His wife stood up, unplugged the TV and threw out his beer. (PLAYBOY August 2010)

The first joke serves as an example of a tendency of naming the two sexes asymmetrically. "A man and his wife" phrase not only defines a woman as merely a man's property but also introduces the story from male perspective, which has been documented as a common technique and described as overly sexist. There are no instances of such phrases as "a woman and her husband." Moreover, the phrase "a man and his wife" (along with "a man and a woman" or "a husband and a wife") illustrates the tendency of putting men before women, which may suggest that women are less worthy. Again, this is very common but phrases as "a wife and a husband" are hardly ever met (Henley 1987; Wareing 1999). The joke is presented in the form of a narrative, in which two characters are introduced: husband and wife who are sitting in the living room, watching television; the husband is drinking beer. The punchline relies on double understanding of the state of being *dependent on some machine and fluids*. While the first and obvious script that may appear here is HOSPITAL, i.e. a need of medical equipment in order to sustain life, other script appears when reading the last part of the joke. This may be HOUSE, i.e. watching television and drinking some beer, and the fact of being addicted to

these. Therefore, the man (husband) is the target here, depicted as beer-driven couch-potato primitive whose life is vegetative-like, i.e. *showing no sign of brain activity* (dictionary definition). The pun may imply that men do nothing at home but lie on the couch, drink beer and watch TV (presumably sports).

2) *Around dusk a patrolman started making his evening rounds and discovered two elderly ladies sitting in a vehicle in the lot of a used-car dealership. He stopped and asked what they were doing.*

"You ladies aren't trying to steal this car, are you?" the officer asked.

"Heavens no," one of the women answered. "We bought it."

"Then why don't you drive it home?" the officer said.

"Neither one of us can drive," the other woman replied.

"Then why on earth did you buy a car?" the officer asked.

"Well," the first woman replied, "we were told we would get screwed if we bought a used car, so now we're just waiting." (PLAYBOY November 2010)

The second joke serves as an example of jokes in which gender-specific terms (*patrolman*) are used (in this case, alongside with gender-neutral term *officer*). In most of the jokes when the gendered terms are used, the change into neutral terms would not affect the funniness, neither the sense of the jokes. Therefore there seems to be no need for the use of gender-specific terms in the jokes. This kind of usage may make women invisible, trivialize women's achievements or lead to the impression that some professions are reserved for men only (Weatherall 2002). The situation in the joke may be described as two elder women sitting at dusk in a car parked in the lot of used-car dealership met by a police officer. It is presented in a form of narrative, again from the male perspective (*a patrolman started making his evening rounds*). The joke again relies on double meaning of words, this time verb *screw*. The first script that would appear is NON-SEXUAL, i.e. buying a used car and getting cheated by paying too much for it. However, because the women are *still waiting*, another script appears, i.e. SEXUAL, in which *getting screwed* would mean having an intercourse. Here, the women are the target. The joke may imply that older women are not attractive enough to find a partner and would do many things to have sexual intercourse, even buy a used car (which they do not need, since they cannot drive). Therefore, women (especially older women) are depicted as sex-obsessed and desperate, and at the same time naive and even stupid (because of the lack of knowledge of meaning of getting screwed while buying a used car).

Here, it seems that reversal of stereotypes is present, since men are most often described as sex-obsessed. Moreover, in this joke semantic derogation (i. e. acquiring negative connotations) of the term *lady* is visible. This is also present in the other magazine, note the next example:

3) *Three old ladies, who are hard of hearing are sitting in their retirement home, reminiscing about old times.*

The first lady recalls shopping at the greengrocer's, and demonstrates with her hands the length and thickness of a cucumber she could buy for a penny.

The second old lady nods, adding that onions used to be much bigger and cheaper too. She also demonstrates the size of two big onions she could buy for a penny a piece.

'I can't hear a word you're saying,' the third old lady remarks, 'but I definitely remember the bloke you're talking about.' (THAT'S LIFE! 29 April 2010)

Originally, the term *lady* was used to a woman in power or in high position (as a female equivalent of *lord*) but with time this changed. In the example above *lady* is put next to the adjective *old* and used as an euphemism for a woman. The term has been downgraded. Additionally, such derogation of terms is not visible in male equivalents, e.g. *lord* or *gentleman*; it is uncommon to use such terms in collocation with "old" (Mills 2008; Weatherall 2002). What is more, this joke, similarly to joke 2), may imply that especially older women are obsessed with sex. In this narrative three hard-of-hearing women are talking about old times, gesticulating. While the first script may be described as NON-SEXUAL, i. e. talking about groceries, the other script (evoked by the word *bloke*, meaning a man) may be described as SEXUAL, i.e. talking about man's genitals. The logical mechanism that is used here may be characterised as analogy, an example of correct reasoning. The analogy is built upon the visual similarities while demonstrating the shapes of cucumber and onions and the shapes of man's penis and testicles. It is worth noting that here not only women are targeted (because of their obsession with sex) but also men, because of reducing man's image to his genitals. The woman remembers the *bloke* basing not on the name or face, but on the gestures she thinks the other women are using to describe his genitals. There are more jokes in which men are reduced to their penises, e. g.:

4) *One morning, after making love, a woman lights up a cigarette.*

'You really ought to quit smoking, you know,' her partner says sternly.

'But I really enjoy a cigarette after sex,' she sighs, tired of being nagged.

'You may well do,' he continues, 'but cigarettes stunt your growth.'

The woman looks at him, incredulous.

'Have you never smoked at all?' she says.

'No, never,' he insists.

Looking down at his manhood, she asks: 'So, what's your excuse then?'

(THAT'S LIFE! 21 January 2010)

The situation in joke 4) may be described as a couple lying in bed after having an intercourse, the woman is smoking. When the man makes a comment about how the cigarettes are unhealthy, she sharply responds by commenting on his *manhood* (according to dictionary definition, the characteristic of being masculine). By asking *what's your excuse then?*, the woman may imply that his penis is too small and unsatisfactory. Naming genitals *manhood* may denote that this is the most important characteristic of a man and the only feature that determines masculinity. However, the man's *manhood* is not the only flaw he has. The woman is tired of *being nagged*, which may imply that this is not the first time the man is telling the woman what she should or should not do. What is interesting, the verb *nag* seems to collocate more often with females, since stereotypically it is women who annoy their men by constantly telling them what to do (and men, because they already know best, do not like to be told off). However, here it is the man who nags, which once again may depict shift in stereotyping.

Finally, a few jokes in the sample have been identified as blonde jokes, playing on the characteristics of promiscuity and stupidity. A majority of them (8 out of 9) have been found in PLAYBOY. The jokes 5) and 6) below represent the specified sexist joke group. As it has been stated earlier, this type of humour mocks specific group of females, in this case blondes. The blond jokes are very popular and can be found not only in English-speaking countries but also in cultures where naturally blonde-headed women are unlikely to be met (Shifman & Lemish 2010b). It is claimed that these jokes play on stereotypes of sexy and dumb blondes because of the threat women might pose, i. e. using their intelligence and attractiveness to control men (Greenwood & Isbell 2002).

5) *A blonde went to pick up her car from the mechanic. "What's the story?" she asked.*

"Just crap in the carburetor," he replied.

"Oh," she said. "How often do I have to do that?" (PLAYBOY January/February 2010)

In the first part of the joke there is a presupposition that the car has broken down and it is at the mechanic's. When the owner (the blonde) comes to pick up the car she asks what was wrong with it. The mechanic answers that *just crap in the carburetor*, meaning some filth in a part of the engine. However, judging by the blonde's response (*how often do I have to do that?*), she misunderstands the mechanic. Therefore, another meaning of *crap in the carburetor* appears, meaning emptying the bowls into some part of the engine. Thus, the blonde may be characterised as not only lacking any basic knowledge (since it seems illogical that emptying the bowls into any part of a car would be a good solution for any problem with the car) but also as knowing nothing about cars, a stereotypical feature of any woman. Moreover, it is worth noting that the mechanic is a male, which reflects another stereotype; only men are good mechanics. Additionally, in every joke where any profession is presented, it is men who hold highly regarded professions (such as managers, doctors, or judges). Women are most often described in relational terms, being wives, mothers or lovers. When presented in public sphere, women are depicted as either cleaners, assistants, or receptionist. This is visible in the example below:

6) *A young man walks into the doctor's surgery and asks to make an appointment.*

'Can you tell me what's wrong with you, sir?' the pretty blonde receptionist asks tactfully.

'Well, I need to see the doctor, but it's rather embarrassing,' the young man stutters. 'You see, I have a very large and almost constant erection.'

'I'm afraid the doctor's busy,' the receptionist purrs, 'but maybe I can squeeze you in.' (THAT'S LIFE! 19 August 2010)

Joke 6) depicts an attractive and sexual blonde who works as a receptionist in doctor's office. Her attractiveness and sexuality is visible in the use of evaluative adjective *pretty* and verbs *to purr* and *to squeeze somebody in*, which may imply sexual connotations. Once again, the narrative is presented from male perspective (*a young man walks into...*). The two scripts that appear may be described as NON-SEXUAL, i.e. making an appointment with the doctor, although the doctor is very busy and SEXUAL, i. e. having a sexual activity in order to help the man with his *very large and almost constant erection*. And

similarly to other jokes, both the man and the woman may be claimed to be targets of the joke. The woman, the blonde, is stereotypically presented as promiscuous and sexual. The man, on the other hand, is described in terms of his penis, which again seems to be his most important attribute.

7. Conclusion

The results of the study confirm the thesis that the language of jokes published in women's and men's magazines is sexist. In *PLAYBOY* both generalized and specified sexist jokes have been found. These present women as chatterboxes, gold diggers, or stupid and promiscuous blondes, playing on traditional women stereotypes. In *THAT'S LIFE!* feminist jokes have been found, in which men are presented in terms of their penises and bed performance. Here, the situation is reversed as not women but men are described in terms of their bodies. In addition, in both magazines instances of post-feminist humour have been found where both women and men are scorned. However, it seems that this type of humour is more popular among *PLAYBOY* readers. What may seem interesting, in *PLAYBOY* a few instances of feminist jokes have been identified. Moreover, these appear to be more numerous and less covert (meaning mocking men's flaws in a more direct manner) than in *THAT'S LIFE!* magazine. Also, in *THAT'S LIFE!* instances of jokes which may be identified sexist have been found. These were not numerous, though. Therefore, by making a great simplification, in the jokes studied men have been depicted as sex- and beer-driven primitives who do nothing but lay in bed and watch sports and are described in terms of their genitals. Women, on the other hand, have been depicted as sex-obsessed, promiscuous, sexual and stupid, described in relational terms.

Most of the jokes of both magazines mock women, which is consistent with other studies and with the claim that women are most often victims of sexism. However, the jokes have not been as overly sexist (or feminist) as those found on the Internet or in other studies. This may be explained by the editorial policies of both magazines and the criticism sexist humour (and sexism itself) has recently received. Internet jokes most often are not filtered by any editors. Moreover, studies concerning gender humour are often based on jokes of particular type, e.g. sexist jokes only. Although jokes in both

magazines have been mostly about men and women, they have not been meant to be of a specific type.

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