

CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF REGIONAL SCRIPT-BASED HUMOR

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to analyse cross-cultural regional script-based humor between Moroccan people and British ones. The aim of the paper is to elucidate through authentic data how, despite the great gap between the two cultures, Moroccan and British people manage to understand and appreciate the regional humor of each other when the conventional scripts of the jokes are commonly shared among the two cultures. However, members of the two cultures fail to understand and appreciate each other jokes when they happen not to share the relevant conventional script activating the regional joke.

Key words: Cross-cultural humor – regional humor – script-based humor – joke understanding and appreciation.

INTRODUCTION

According to Mulkay (1988: 40), since the meaning of words varies depending on linguistic and extra-linguistic factors and since the meaning of the word in serious discourse may not be the same as in humorous discourse,

"We cannot... find the meaning of a joke simply by reading off from a dictionary the specific meanings of words which make up that joke. Rather, each word, as it is read or heard, evokes a complex range of possible uses and implications. These constitute the script for that word" (Mulkay 1988: 40).

This means that the understanding of cross-cultural humor seems to be problematic as the process of interpretation of culture dependent jokes is impaired by some culture specific block elements. To overcome these block elements, the non-native speaker is required to be equipped with a good mastery of the target language and culture.

In this paper, we will specifically concentrate on jokes which are culture-dependent because they are activated by some conventional scripts evoked by the words used in the joke. These conventional scripts are very often based on certain common stereotypes that members of the culture have assigned to a specific group or person in the world of jokedom. These stereotypical

scripts represent a necessary background information for understanding and appreciating this category of jokes.

Regional script-based humor

An analysis of Moroccan regional humour shows that it is mainly based on some recurrent stereotypical notions and characteristics that are assigned to different regional groups in Morocco. We mean by regional humour the reference to a specific regional group as being the butt of the joke where a specific stereotypical characterization is dominant and represents the activating element of the humour. The understanding of such type of humour requires the prerequisite knowledge of certain socio-cultural stereotypical background information which is realized in the form of conventional scripts such of the script of stinginess in relation to Soussi people (people of the western south of Morocco, region of Agadir), the script of cowardice in relation to Fassi people (region of Fes), the script of obstinacy in relation to Sahraoui people (South-east of Morocco, region of Errachidia).

Cross culturally shared script: Script of “stinginess” in Soussi jokes and Scottish jokes.

In the British society, the following jokes express stereotypical information about the way Scotsmen are perceived among British people, at least in the world of humour. (see Asimov 1971 : 287, Mulkay 1988 : 66, Davies 1988).

1- [If you want to get rid of a Scotsman just throw a penny in front of a coming double-decker] .

2- [If you want to drive a Scotsman crazy just throw a penny in a rounded room and say that it is in the corner] .

3- [How do you make a Scotsman deaf and mute? By asking him to contribute to a charity] .

4- [La femme d’un Ecossai essaie de persuader son mari à acheter des jouets de Noël à son fils].

- Enfin, tout de même, Edward ! il faut faire quelque chose, il faut bien qu’il s’amuse un peu cet enfant...

Alors le bonhomme réfléchit et il dit :

- S’il faut qu’il s’amuse, tu n’as qu’à prendre une paire de ciseaux et lui couper les poches de son pantalon .

The above jokes are based on one common humorous trigger which is the script of "stinginess" and which represents the piece of information to be communicated through these jokes and to be understood by the audience before they can appreciate its funniness. According to Zhao (1988 : 285).

"The comprehension of the joke such as "the Scots are so stingy that simply asking them to give money to a charity turn them into deaf-mutes" must necessarily precede any possible humor experience".

The communicative value of such jokes resides in their presentation of some popular stereotypes that people from different cultural backgrounds must get acquainted with. Once these stereotypes are internalized, the hearer can respond very easily to any type of joke which involves a Scotsman and which plays on the script of "stinginess" as a humorous trigger. Regardless of the truth value of the stereotype in question, the script of "stinginess" as a stereotypical convention is associated with Scotsmen and needs to be exploited by the hearer if the joke is to be comprehended and appreciated.

In order to test our predictions about the interpretation of a script – based Scottish joke, we have asked our Moroccan informants to listen to 3 Scottish jokes (1,2,3) which are activated by the comic script of stinginess. The Moroccan versions of these jokes are as follows:

1’-(Joke 1)

[?ilaböititthənnamənsiskutlandirmiluširjalqddamšiTubisžaj].

2’-(Joke 2)

[?ilaböititsəTTišisKutLandirmilurjalfši bit məDwwərwgullu rah fəlqənt]

3’-(Joke 3)

[?ilaböititrəddšiskutLandiSəmmwəbkəmsnuddir, gullujəÇTišiSaDaqa] .

Table 1 Provides the results of question 1:

Table 1:

<u>Joke2</u>		Question 1 : Do you find this joke :			
		Not funny at all	Not quite funny	Quite funny	Very funny
Joke 1	Informants	3	4	12	21
	Percentage	17,50%		82,50%	
Joke 2	Informants	0	0	3	37
	Percentage	0%		100%	
Joke 3	Informants	1	4	13	22
	Percentage	12,50%		87,50%	

Joke 1:

In responding to question 1, as Table 1 shows, out of 40 informants, 7 (17,50%) judged the joke as being either not funny at all (3 informants) or not quite funny (4 informants). These informants provided various justifications for their judgement such as "the content of the joke is something normal" (informants 2,35,40) or "the joke belittles or disparages the Scots" (informants 20,40), or "Scotsmen are lovers of money" (informant 28), or "the joke is not funny because of the way suggested to get rid of the Scotsman who is a lover of money" (informant 31).

Now, those informants (82, 50%) who judged joke 1 as being funny also provided various justifications, except for 2 informants (4, 29) who suggested none. For them, the joke is funny because

- "The Scottish man is stingy, he is always after money even if his life is in danger" (informants 1,14, 16,17,18,19,22,23).
- "The Scotsman will risk his life for a penny" (informants 26,27,30,32,33,34,36).
- "Scots are fond of money" (informants 22, 39).
- "The Scotsman is poor and can kill himself for a penny" (informant 37).
- "Or vaguely because "The nature of the joke calls for laughter" (informant 12,13)

Joke 2:

In responding to question 1, all our informants (100%) judged joke 2 as being either quite funny (3 informants : 7, 50%), or very funny (37 informants : 92, 50%). While 4 informants (10%) did not provide any justification, the remaining informants came up with different answers. More than 50% (21 informants) judged the joke as being funny because "a rounded room does not have a corner, so the Scotsman will never find the penny". The other informants (except for 3 who provided unclear answers) justified their appreciation of the joke by saying that Scottish men are "stupid", "stupid and stingy", "careless", "naive" or "weak-minded".

Joke 3:

Out of our 40 informants, only 5 (12, 50%) judged joke 3 as being either not quite funny (4 informants) or not funny at all (1 informant). Among these, 3 informants justified their answer by referring to the stinginess of the Scots, while the two others found the joke not funny because "it is very banal" or "what makes it a little funny is its exaggeration". Note that among these five informants, 3 informants, thought they have judged the joke as being not funny, have interpreted the joke the way it is intended and have identified the stereotypical information which seems to activate the Scottish jokes, namely the script of stinginess.

Among the 35 informants (87, 50%) who have judged joke 8 as being funny, 19 provided either no justification (13 informants) or no clear answer (6 informants). Out of the 21 informants who gave a reason for their answer, 13 informants (61, 90%) laughed because of the stinginess of the

Scotsman. The remaining 8 informants (38, 10%) laughed because of the stinginess of the Scotsman the remaining 8 informants (38, 10%) suggested various justifications, such as "the Scots are poor, stupid, or they sacrifice themselves for money".

Therefore, whether our informants judged the joke funny or not funny, most of them seem to have extracted the stereotypical information that is implied in the joke about Scottish people. Of course, we should admit that our exposition of our informants to 3 successive Scottish jokes (1,2,3) may have helped them to identify how the Scottish man is perceived in jokes. Their interpretations might have been different perhaps if the same informants had to judge one single joke. Being exposed to three jokes which are activated by the same script, our informants seem to have, by and large, grasped a recurrent stereotypical characteristic of the Scotsman in the world of jokedom. This becomes clearer when we consider their answer to question 3 which relates to the three Scottish Jokes 1,2,3 : "After listening to joke 1,2,3, do you get any piece of information or characterization of the Scottish man as he is presented in the jokes ?". In answering this question:

- 30 informants (75%) referred to the stinginess of Scottish people.
- 10 informants (25%) provided various characterizations of Scottish people, such as they are "stupid" (informants 9, 23), "poor" (informants 40,11,4), "materialistic" (informant 16), "selfish and unhelpful" (informant 38), or very vaguely "they have bad and negative characteristics" (informants 1,14).

Note that the same stereotype summarized in the script of "stinginess" is also popular in the Moroccan culture as it is associated with a specific regional group, namely Soussi people (Living in the region of Agadir). In fact, many Moroccan informants, in answering question 3 (eg. Informants 5,13,15,16,20,21,22,28,30,33,37) have stated explicitly the stereotypical similarity that exists between Scottish people in the British society and Soussi people in the Moroccan context. These informants have suggested that the same jokes (1,2,3) can be applied to Soussi people in Morocco who are presented as stingy in Moroccan jokes. One may perhaps say that – whether consciously or unconsciously – this "accidental" similarity in the way the two communities are perceived in the world of humour may have contributed to the understanding and interpretation of these jokes. The script of stinginess, being part of one's joking repertoire, may have been evoked in relation to a British butt (Scotsmen) instead of a Moroccan butt (Soussi people) by means of what we may call script transfer.

For British people, the following Moroccan jokes have the potential to be appreciated since the same script of stinginess is at play. The butt of the joke, whether a Moroccan Soussi or a Scotsman, loves the money to the extent of risking his life for it. Consider the following Moroccan jokes:

5- [hadawahədssussikannaÇəsšwjjawjžiwəldujəfjju "nuD ? a bbanuD rah lhanutkajttħrəq" žabbahnaDwmšanišanjəšrikurdabašjəqtlrasušwjjazawəldutajöewwət "rah mašilhanutdjannallittəħrəq" žabbahgallu "safi ?awldilliÇTallahÇTah rani šritlkurda"] .

6- [hadawaħədssussiböajwrrilnnas rah tajsDDaq. žməÇbzzafdjalssəÇÇajawhuwwajgull hum "öadilluħflfluslibqafssmadjalkumxuduh. WalakinlliTaħfəl ?arD rah djaliħtawawaħədmajqisu] .

According to the content of these jokes, if they are translated into English, they are likely to be understood and appreciated by British people. Here are the English versions:

5'- [There was this Soussi who was sleeping when his son came to wake him up" Hurry up father the shop is on fire" The father, being in despair, ran to buy a rope to kill himself. Suddenly, the son came back shouting to inform his father that it was not their shop which was put to fire. The father replied: "It's too late, may son, I have already bought the rope"].

6'- [A Soussi wanted to show off to other people that he gives charity. He gathered a group of beggars and said to them "listen please. I'm going to throw some coins in the air; Please, those which remain stuck in the air are yours, you can take them, but those which fall down on the floor are mine. Don't touch them"].

In order to see how native speakers of English will respond to a Moroccan Soussi joke and its stereotypical implications, we have translated joke (5) (corresponding to joke 2 in the questionnaire) into English (5') and we have asked our 8 English informants to judge it. Table 2 summarizes the results of question 1:

Table

<u>Joke 5'</u>	<u>Question 1: Do you find this joke :</u>			
	Not funny at all	Not quitefunny	Quitefunny	Very funny
Informants	3	0	5	0
Percentage	37,50%		62,50%	

Out of our 8 informants, 3 (37,50%) judged the joke as being not funny at all. While informant (3) provided no justification, informant (1) said that "it is not understandable, and informant (4) suggested "I lived among the Soussi people for 9 years and they are a lot more intelligent than many people think !!! or this joke implies". In other words, informant 4 judged the joke as not funny because she seems not to agree with the implication of the joke that a Soussi is stupid, though there is no such implication. As we can see, none of the informants has interpreted the joke the way it is intended because no one has alluded to the underlying script of stinginess. In fact, in answering question 3, no informant has suggested any characterization of the Moroccan Soussi on the basis of his/her understanding of the joke.

Out of our 5 informants who have judged the joke as being quite funny, 2 did not justify their answer (informants 7,8) ; (the remaining informants suggested different reasons, such as :

- "because it is typical of most fathers' thinking" (informant 2).
- "because it shows a stereotypical national trait" (informant 5).
- "I find it humorous that someone would rather kill himself than lose the money spent on a rope for that purpose". (informant 6).

In answering question 3, while informants (7 and 8) could not give any characterization of Soussi people because - as they stated – they are not familiar with the Moroccan culture, informant (3) characterized Soussi people as being "traditionally hardworking". Informant (6), however, seems to have given the right interpretation of the joke: "the stereotype of the Soussi who is tightwad is played upon here". It should be noted, however, that informant (6) is an American who has spent seven years in Morocco. This factor might have helped him (like with joke 5) in the interpretation of this joke since he may be acquainted with some stereotypical conventions that regulate Moroccan humor.

Generally speaking, apart from informant (6), all the other informants (87, 50%) whether they found the joke funny or not – have not interpreted the joke the way it is intended. This may be due to the fact that the script of stinginess, which is associated with Soussi people in Morocco and represents a necessary condition for the full understanding and appreciation of Soussi jokes, hasn't been evoked. This seems to support Zhao's (1988 : 282) statement that :

"a successful grasp of what a joke contains both explicitly and implicitly, literally and metaphorically is the preliminary condition for laughing at it".

What Zhao does not take into account, however, is that there are some people who may laugh at a joke without grasping its implications, and others who may not laugh at a joke though they do grasp its implications. Since there seems to be (and this needs further extensive research) no fixed, clear-cut correlation between laughing at a joke and understanding its intended implications, it would be more sensible to modify Zhao's (1988: 282) statement as follows:

"a successful grasp of what a joke contains both explicitly and implicitly, literally and metaphorically is the preliminary condition for [understanding or interpreting it]".

Note that the word Soussi – the butt of the joke – can be replaced by a Scotsman and the joke will work since the same script of stinginess is being exploited.

If the hearer knows about the stereotypical information about Soussi people, then he knows that he is dealing with a recurrent type of joke which plays on a conventional script of "Stinginess" associated with a specific community in the Moroccan society.

If, however, the hearer does not know anything about the transmitted piece of information, but manages to absorb it while resolving the joke, then the hearer has not only been amused but

has also internalized a piece of information, namely a stereotypical convention which reflects the way Soussi people are perceived in the Moroccan society. This script of "stinginess" in relation to a Soussi or a Scotsman is a necessary condition for the full understanding and appreciation of such type of joke.

We would like to suggest that though these jokes are loaded with socio-cultural information which represents a key to their appreciation, they still can be translated from one language into another so long as the activating script exists in the two cultures. This undermines Jordan's (1988) claim that only "content – based humour" (or language –free humour) is translatable since it is free from language- specific and culture- specific elements. The above examples show to some extent how culture –based humour is susceptible to cross- cultural appreciation and cross-linguistic translation so long as there are similarities in some stereotypical conventions across cultures. Both the British and Moroccan cultures share the script of stinginess in relation to a specific community, and this allows the translation of these jokes from English into Moroccan Arabic and vice versa. Now, if we translate the English joke (25) into Moroccan Arabic and we replace the Scotsman by a Soussi, the joke can be considered as a typically Moroccan Soussi joke:

3-[How do you make a Scotsman deaf and mute ? By asking him to contribute to a charity].

Moroccan version:

[?ilaböititreddšisusiSəmm w bkəmsnuddir, gullujəÇTišiSadaqa].

Cross-cultural unshared script: Script of “cowardice” in Fassi jokes

In serious discourse, the script surrounding the word "Fassi" (someone whose origin is from the city of Fes) evokes some associations which are not the ones that are exploited in humorous discourse. In serious discourse, the word "Fassi" evokes a script which involves stereotypically certain attributes like: a wealthy person living in a villa with a Mercedes and leading a successful commercial business. However, once this word is used in humorous discourse, the Fassi is presented as a coward, weak person who cannot ensure his self-defence and the defence of his family. In our data, this script of cowardice and physical weakness is the activator of the humorous effect and represents the main back-ground information necessary for the full understanding of Fassi jokes. Consider the following examples:

7-[hadawaħədššffardxəllši Dar djalwaħədlfasi.

BdatajdurmənhnalhnašwjjawhowajədxullbitnnəÇas. lqalfasinaÇəshuwa w mərtu.

ImrahssatbššffarwhijjabdatkatfjjəqražəlhašwjjjaššfarnəwwDhumwgallhum.

"šufuhanaöandirdwwajrabTTabaširhna rah llixrəžÇlihanqtlu" žməÇššffarlliböawzadbħalu.

žatləmrabatkatöəwwətÇlaražlhawhuwwajgullha" ?aöisəktiwwllahilaÇəbartÇlajəmmah.

xərrəžtrəžlimənddwajrawmaša fnišbənlħmarlaxur"].

English version

[A thief broke into the house of a Fassi. He started searching room by room till he got in the bedroom where the Fassi and his wife were sleeping. The woman woke up frightened and tried to wake up her husband. The thief asked them to stand up and said: "I'm going to trace a circle here and you'll get inside it. If your step out of it, I'll kill you". He, then, took what he wanted and left the house. The wife started shouting at her husband" How come you didn't do anything to chase him?" to which the husband replied" Do you know? I got him. I stepped once out of the circle, but he did not see me, son of the donkey"].

8- [haduwahədttmənjadjalffasaxrżukajtsarawbllilfəmərrakešwddənjaxawja. Huma Daru mÇawahədddərbwhuwwajbanlumžūždjalrżżalžajjinfrasddərb. ŽawahədfihumhuwwazzaÇim gal " ?awwilihumabihumžūžwhnabinaōitmənja, kiōandiru] .

English version:

8'- [Eight Fassis went out to have a walk in the streets of Marrakech. Since it was late at night, the streets were empty. As they turned into a street, they saw two men coming from the other extreme. The bravest of the eight said in fear" oh my God, they are two and we are only eight. How can we fight them?]

This script of "cowardice" represents – like the script of stinginess – an example of a multitude of other scripts which originally are not included in the original semantic competence of the Moroccan native speaker. But once this script is acquired, the native speaker can establish a link between the word "Fassi" and the attributes "coward, weak", an association which he could not make before the acquisition of this particular script. Therefore, the word "Fassi" calls for different scripts depending on whether we are involved in serious or humorous discourse. In the world of jokedom, the association between the word "Fassi" and the script of "cowardice" is internalized and serves as a background information to the understanding of the joke. For a non-native speaker, the understanding of a Fassi joke may be blocked in the absence of the relevant conventional comic script of cowardice that activates it.

To test these predictions again, we have asked our English informants to judge joke (8) in its Moroccan version (8') which corresponds to joke (3) in the questionnaire. Table 9 summarizes the informants' responses to question 1 :

Table 3:

<u>Joke 8'</u>	<u>Question 1 : Do you find this joke :</u>			
	Not funny at all	Not quitefunny	Quitefunny	Very funny
Informants	4	2	1	1
Percentage	75%%		25%	

Out of our 8 English informants, 6 informants (75%) have judged the joke as being not funny at all (4 informants) or not quite funny (2 informants). While 2 informants (1, 3) provided no justification, and informant (5) gave an unclear answer, the other informants suggested various reasons. For them, the Joke is not funny because:

- "It is not understandable to English knowledge" (informant 2).
- "Cowardice is usually not funny to me and having never heard of this reputation of the Fassi, my first reaction is embarrassment for the Fassis" (informant 6) .
- "It seems like the Fassis are cooler than the people from Marrakech" (informant 7).

It seems that only informant (6) has managed to interpret the joke the way it is intended by identifying its stereotypical implication. This is clear from the informants' responses to question 3, where no one referred to the script of cowardice which activates the joke, except for informant (6) who stated explicitly that "the Fassi is stereotyped (I had learned by this joke) as cowardly: "The Khowafin". Note that informant's (6) judgement provides a very good example of the absence of a fixed predictable correlation between the degree of funniness of a joke and the degree of its understanding. Though he has interpreted the joke in the intended way, he judged it as being not funny at all because according to him cowardice is not a trait to be laughed at.

Only 2 informants (25%) judged the joke as being funny. Informant (4) justified her answer by saying: "It would be" hashuma" (a shame) for 8 Fassis to fight 2 Soussis". Informant (8) gave the following reason: "it seems like the Fassis are fearful". In responding to question 3 informant (4) referred to "a social/ historical enmity between Fes and Marrakech reflected". While informant (8) did not come up with any characterization of Fassi people as they are presented in the joke.

Therefore, among our 8 informants, only 2 informants (6,8) (25%) have understood the joke with its intended implications. On the basis of this very limited number of informants and very limited amount of data, it seems that our predictions were to some extent valid. Without having a prerequisite knowledge of how a Fassi is stereotypically viewed by Moroccans in humorous discourse, the interpretation of the joke the way it is intended seems to be a difficult task.

CONCLUSION

In order to conclude, we can say that the understanding of script-based regional humor involves a prerequisite knowledge of the activating script which is based on some Stereotypical information attributed to a given regional group. As we have seen with our English informants, it seems that if the recipient of these script-based jokes has not internalized the relevant activating script, he may not achieve full understanding of the joke. It is worth adding that in script- based jokes, the script evokes the butt and the butt evokes the script. For instance, the script of "stinginess" evokes the Soussi and the mention of the word "Soussi" in humorous discourse evokes the script of stinginess. If we try a Fassi (from the city of Fes) joke with the script of stinginess, the joke will just go aflat. Similarly, if we apply the script of "cowardice" to a Sahraoui (from the region of Errachidia city) as a butt, the joke will not work.

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