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What is the Impact of Multimodality and Intersubjectivity on the English Humour?

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The purpose of my article is to demonstrate how the terms of multimodality and intersubjectivity function within the areana of English humour, specifically in reference to a chosen sitcom. To this means I shall employ the cognitive apparatus of conceptual integration theory, aka blending.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The presented research problem centres around the notions of intersubjectivity, i.e. the human ability to display a shared perception of reality with regard to members of their own community, as well as multimodality, i.e. the use of more than one sense for the purpose of meaning rendition. Both phenomena are studied here with regard to the English humour, whose explanation is based on a cognitive linguistic method of blending.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: Having explained the term 'English humour', I then clarify intersubjectivity, multimodality and cognitive integration, which will serve here as the tools for the purpose of my humour analysis. Therein I intend to show how they interlink and how their roles influence the comprehension of English humour.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The result of this argumentation is constituted by the fact that intersubjectivity and multimodality together with blending can greatly enhance the comprehension of the amusing contents within English comedy.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The analysis confirms that conceptual integration theory, as enriched by intersubjectivity and multimodality, provides a humour researcher with a concrete apparatus for measuring humour effects. However, further research is advocated into the process of blending, as accompanied by intersubjectivity and multimodality, with recourse to English humour as well as other types of humour, e.g. the Polish comedy, in order to provide contrastive evidence for these tools and their usefulness or effectiveness.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **BLENDING, CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION THEORY, ENGLISH HUMOUR, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, MULTIMODALITY**

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1. Introduction

To begin with, I intend to briefly depict the concept of the English humour. It is a peculiar concept and when asking people's opinion on it, the views seem to belong to a dichotomy of a love-hate kind, ranging from the utmost adoration of the phenomenon in question, to the total disgust and loathing on the part of the speaker. It is understandable that not everyone will take to the same type of comedy, with some preferring black humour, others clinging to light-hearted sitcoms, whereas still others delighting in a good old stand-up comedy. However, when it comes to the English humour, there is no middle ground, it is a matter of either-or belonging, and, for my part, the reason for it links with the misconceptions that lie behind the term 'English humour'. In the majority of cases, people who detest it are unfortunately foreigners to Britain, and hence they do not possess the cultural insight to the country and its people, which is to be blamed for their lack of interest in English comedy. As for the admirers of the English humour, these are, on the other hand, mostly of English origin, or with enough knowledge about the culture in question to be able to appreciate the phenomenon (more on this culture ingredient further). Yet, to defend the haters in this respect, I would like to maintain that the disaffiliation with the English humour might come from the misunderstanding of its nature. Therefore, I will try to list a number of characteristic features that will be present within the broad term 'the English humour' itself, and will account for the aforementioned dichotomy of attitudes.

1.1. English humour and its characteristics

Firstly, the English humour can be classed as a subtype of a general human capability to perceive something as funny, which simplistically here I shall refer to as humour in general. In the same manner, we can discuss the Polish kind of humour, the Russian humour or the Italian one. However, it is crucial not to confuse any of these types with the notion of a 'sense of humour' (on more issues to do with what humour is or might not be, and its relation to associative phenomena such as a sense of humour or laughter see Jabłońska-Hood, 2015, pp. 99-109). Typically, a 'sense of humour' is one's ability to perceive amusing situations or objects around, irrespective of one's nationality, including the capability to laugh at one's own conduct or thoughts (Jabłońska-Hood, 2015, pp. 101-102). However, as far as the English humour is concerned, it will necessarily combine the two, i.e. the English humour and the sense of humour of English people, as contrasted with other ethnical groups. Specifically, part and parcel of the English humour is the possession of a sense of humour that one can display eagerly and as frequently as possible in all situations. Nowhere else in the world can we encounter humour in every sphere of life, no matter how serious or grave it might be. In a nutshell, English people delight in the use of their humour as a coping mechanism, as a communicative strategy or simply as a conversation turn-on, without the necessity to know each other well, to share common ground or knowledge. The English humour seems to be for the

English an all-round strategy that helps in life, and makes communication easier. This slant also justifies another characteristic of the English humour, namely the fact that there are usually no limits (or very few) in comedy. If we assume that the English, somehow oddly, use comedy in every possible situation, then there can be no boundary for it, irrespective of the topic, or situation; i.e. there are no taboos within the English humour. On the contrary, the more touchy the subject of comedy, the better. This inextricably links with the fact that the English like their sense of freedom and unrestraint, hence breaking social or interpersonal taboos that might constrain them, so having no established sacred topics appears to be only natural. Additionally, the English humour must be witty, elaborate and sophisticated. The more intelligent the contents, the better, which frequently means joining different media and modes of communication (see more on that below). But above all, the English comedy must have obligatory and numerous references to some events from the culture and history of Great Britain, whether the recent ones, or not, does not matter too much. It is basically the necessity to allude to Englishness that counts, no matter how obscure the allusion might turn out to be. And so all possible references to the royal family, historical events and people, politics, the current affairs, celebrities, etc. will be in demand. Without this stress on the Englishness, there would be mediocre humour and it certainly would not be valid too highly. In general, I believe that the English pride themselves on their culture and to display the pride they allude to Englishness, which constitutes an obstacle for the outsiders who do not possess enough information about the English culture or way of life to get the message. Hence the frequet claim on the part of non-natives that there is nothing funny in the English humour. This specific feature is so intrinsic in the notion of the English humour that it discourages people from the phenomenon and trying to understand the English comedy becomes too much for many. I hope to present the omnipresent cultural element within the English comedy scene below, with the actual analysis of the comic material, in order to show how complex and demanding the English humour is.

2. Methods of analysis: Multimodality, intersubjectivity and cognitive integration theory as methods used to examine English humour

2.1. Multimodality

Now, having presented my view on the English humour, I shall turn to the notion of multimodality as well as intersubjectivity that might prove vital for the English comedy. Let us start with multimodality. In recent years, this term has become more and more recognised within language studies. It bears a significant impact on language and its conceptualisation by a language use. The whole idea of multimodality is related to yet another concept, namely ‘embodiment’, which stands for the fact that our thinking processes are heavily influenced by our body. Specifically, “the mind is inherently embodied, reason is shaped by the body” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 5). This means that people consider

palpable experiences which they gain via their senses as those that are far easier to comprehend than the relations which are not tangible. So again an inescapable conclusion to be drawn from this leads us to the statement that in order to categorize and understand highly abstract things we must readily turn to our basic sensual experience in which we ground our perception of the less concrete matters (Forceville, 2009, pp. 19-44). Seen in this light, multimodality can be said to indicate the fact that we will necessarily utilise various modalities in our conceptualisation process.

2.2. Intersubjectivity

In addition to that, intersubjectivity can also be said to add to the meaning contents in humour studies, but it does so within a certain perspective. Let us first turn to a definition of intersubjectivity. It has been proposed in the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology (online) to be denoted as follows: "Intersubjectivity refers to a shared perception of reality between or among two or more individuals" (Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology online). Similarly, it is also defined as "(...) the coordination of cognitive systems between speakers and hearers, which is the very basis of discourse and a precondition for language use" (Verhagen, 2005, after Brems et al., 2014, p. 1). What this entails is that any language user will process information and comprehend communication via the lens of their own culture, which is interlinked with language and the ability to convey ideas. The intersubjectivity draws certainly on the notion of subjectivity. Yet subjectivity on its own is one thing, i.e. idea that we do posses our own personal perspective on everything surrounding us, language including, and everyone's subjectivity will differ from others (Atkins, 2005, p. 1). Yet, our subjectivity is definitely subsumed by the cultural perspective we bear within ourselves, and this is exactly the knowledge and experience every individual shares with their fellowmen, specifically intersubjectivity. Seen in this light, intersubjectivity, which happens to be also a reflection of one's subjectivity, is of vast importance for humour studies, and I maintain that it cannot be disregarded at any point. Further, I believe that it is possible to talk about intersubjective, culture-oriented humour, which I will aim to explicate in detail below.

2.3. Conceptual integration theory – an overview

Having introduced the theoretical background for my analysis, I shall now proceed to the brief explanation of the apparatus that I incorporate so as to explain humour in detail, namely the conceptual integration theory model, aka blending. This I adapt to connect also with both multimodality and intersubjectivity, which can be explicated via the idea of blending, too.

According to Fauconnier and Turner, the proponents of conceptual integration theory, which I will henceforth call CIT for short, a significant term within their paradigm is the

idea of a 'mental space'. Mental spaces are defined by the theory's proponents in the following fashion: "partial structures that proliferate when we think and talk, allowing a fine-grained partitioning of our discourse and knowledge structures" (Fauconnier, 1998, p. 11). Apart from that, any mental space is said to be "built up in part by recruiting from (possibly many) conceptual domains and from local context" (Fauconnier & Turner, 2006, p. 331). Hence, mental spaces operate as temporary associative structures which are activated during information processing on the part of the human brain.

To put it simply, we can say it is a field of associations that is actively created by a language user when they try to comprehend a new idea or a new concept. A case in point might be a mental space of a body with its organs which is evoked upon the comprehension of a phrase 'a head of the department'. In order to successfully deal with the meaning of this expression, we need to think of the body part 'head' which will give us the idea of the positioning. Namely, head is situated at the top of our bodies and plays a crucial role for humans in all possible respects, hence if we imagine a person as being the head of the department, we will map our knowledge of heads in relation to the remaining body parts, and hence construct the meaning as relating to a person who is in charge, assuming a top position in the department, in contrast with its other members, who are less significant and would be oriented lower on the ladder of importance. Incidentally, the example with the head of department is also a good illustration of the phenomenon which assumes that mental spaces of varying origin can link in networks. This procedure is most significant for meaning creation, as meanings rely on other meanings to produce novel connections within language. Thus, returning to the above instance, our bodily head would be mapped on the metaphorical high position in the structure of the department, also referred to as head. In addition to that, the high orientation within body is mapped onto the high status and position within a department organization, and similarly we find the notion of importance both for body and organization, that goes parallel with the height. Such a network of interrelated associations between the body organ, which here constitutes mental space 1, and a department position, which makes for mental space 2 at hand, forms a network of correspondences between diverse and separate mental spaces that are brought together for the purpose of understating the expression. The set of correspondences is then projected from original mental spaces to the blended mental space in the procedure of conceptual integration, known colloquially as the blending. Hence all the elements, or correspondences enumerated above are blended, e.g. the physical highness and the metaphorical highness and important position in a structure become one, so to say. All such projections become blended in the blended space, and it is possible to represent the meaning creation via the following graph:

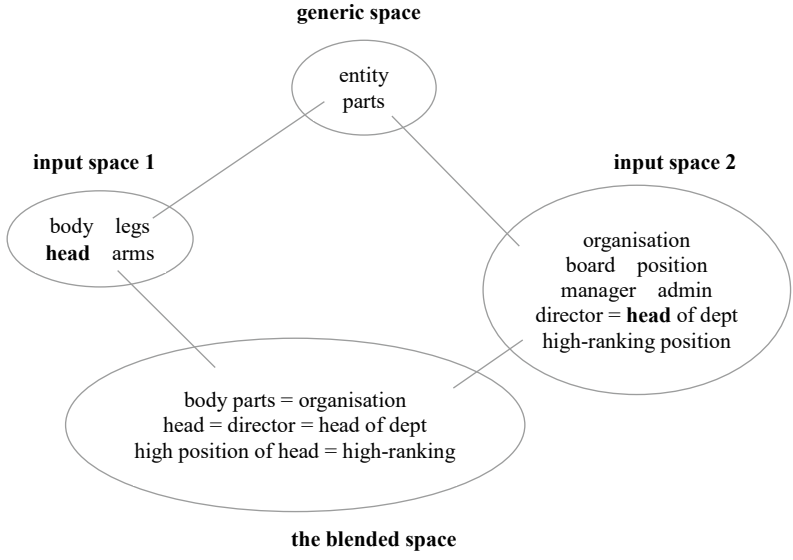

Figure 1. The conceptual integration of head of department.

3. The main analysis of the English humour: the genre of sitcom

Having presented the theoretical background to my article, I would now like to proceed to the analysis of humorous material, i.e. an illustration from a renowned sitcom entitled Fawlty Towers.

3.1. Fawlty Towers – an exemplary English sitcom

The scene that I shall discuss originates from the classic English sitcom entitiled Fawlty Towers, which is a B&B, and could be entitled "Don't mention the war" (please follow the link to the scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xnNhzgcWTk), as it focuses on the subject of WW2 and Germans. The episode hinges around the foreign guests to the B&B, who are originally from Germany. We witness their stay in the hotel, where the owner – Basil Fawlty – has had an accident with his head and does not really think up straight, the owner's wife is in hospital and so the maid, Polly, has a task of containing the outspoken Basil Fawlty and making sure everything is in order. However, Mr Fawlty, due to the head injury, behaves most erratically, which is still enhanced by the fact that he is personally petrified of insulting the German guests and walks around the hotel telling the staff they must not at any circumstance mention the Second World War. However,

his efforts rest at nothing, owing to his own fear which actually prompts him to throw allusions to the war at any occasion in front of the Germans. It all starts innocently with his slips of the tongue, where he mispronounces food names thus uttering the names of famous Nazi generals. Hence, instead of gerkin he says Göring, for example. To the guests' horror, Basil Fawlty does not seem to be aware of his mispronunciation and then he starts mentioning other things connected deeply with the war, at which one of the German women starts crying. The partner of hers explains that she does not have great memories of wartime, and he asks Fawlty not to start this behaviour again. However, Fawlty has this anxiety of war mentioning so very much on his mind, that he cannot refrain from it, and he constantly operates within the frame of the war. Therefore, when asked not to start it again, literally in these words, he takes offense and is highly surprised at the accusation. Clearly, he thinks about starting the war, instead of starting the conversation on the topic of the war, and insults the guests even further, stating that it is actually them, i.e. the Germns, who started it all, which becomes apparent when he follows this utterance by saying that Germans invaded Poland. The matters get even worse, as the traumatized German woman begins to bawl on hearing that. Then, Fawlty starts asking after her, and the two German men explain that she is touchy about the war, in pretty much the same manner as all German people are. This hint, we might assume, sobers up Fawlty's mistakes in conduct as he decides to apologize and plans that he will play up a funny sketch to cheer the guests up. When the Germans are concentrated on the crying woman, and do not look at Basil, we see his plan to show a funny performance incidentally concerns Hitler, as Fawlty stands up straight and takes two fingers and places them under his nose, signifying the mustache of the Führer. There is no doubt he will play up a scene which is to amuse the guest by laughing off Hitler and his personality. This gesture is merely visible to the viewers of the comedy, as well as the maid who immediately grasps the situation and tries to encourage Fawlty to show off some other person, which he does not wish to do. Finally, we watch Basil Fawlty perform his most famous walk of all, namely the distorted walk of Adolf Hitler. Obviously, the German guests are not at all amused and everybody quarrels with the owner of the hotel who does not understand the issue at stake. In fact, he accuses the Germans of not exhibiting any sense of humour, which in itself is another joke on the nationality in question, but I will return to this below. Having described the scene, I ought to explain that this particular example of English humour is not very much appreciated by many, however, I reckon it is skillfully interwoven into the sitcom by means of Fawlty's head injury. Clearly, the script writers knew that the idea of mocking a different nation is risky, hence they introduced into the script of this episode Basil Fawlty's head injury, which is responsible for his rude and obnoxious behaviour towards the Germans, for which Fawlty apologizes profusely at the end of the episode, when he recovers fully. This maneuver provides a frame for the whole scene and allows for the introduction of a touchy subject. Not that the British public will need it. The English love to have a laugh at all kinds of controversial topics and in all honesty, there is no limit to their humour. So the clever arrangement of the episode is more for the sake of non-English nationals. Though this incompatibility between

the English sense of humour and what is allowed to be mocked in the U.K., as well as the different standards of comedy in Germany, or any other countries, for that matter, is a first and most striking incongruity which sets the scene for all the other funniness of the episode. Also, this feature pertains to intersubjectivity and is very much culture-oriented, especially when we consider the fact that Basil Fawlty openly states that the German people have no sense of humour. This statement is in itself a common joke among the British people, who like to perceive themselves as superiour to the German nation in respect of humour. This dimension takes the culture element onto another level, whereby we witness what we might refer to as metacognition or metacommunication between the English. Again, this is a standard characteristic of the typically English sense of humour, providing an insight for the viewers or audience of the comedy in question in order to establish common ground and to have a rapport similar to insider's knowledge of the British culture and society. This metalevel of communication in the sitcom would be introduced by a separate mental space of English culture, which is added onto the blend of the episode's contents and which also reigns supreme over the palpable context of the scene I am analyzing here (see the diagram below). As for the CIT, we have another two intermediary-level mental spaces that set the ground for humour, namely the the input space of the English and their comedy as opposed to the input space of Germans and their idea of what is or is not funny. These two, culture-based general inputs are blended. Then, we encounter a set of verbal ambiguities, such as Prawn Goebbels or Herman Göring, which clearly link various unconnected spaces, i.e food and war mental spaces. Further, gesture and conduct also boost humour. Specifically, Basil's inappropriate behaviour contrasts with the idea of English politeness and public image. Hence, the head injury is a rather ingenuous creation which excuses any possible thought of rudeness and allows for the light-heartedness. These two inputs spaces also collide and provide more amusement. Moreover, the silly walk that Cleese performs impersonating Hitler certainly belongs to the genre of slapstick which introduces the notion of multimodality here. Yet, watching this walk, we can have another throwback reference to John Cleese in the Monty Python sketch of the Ministry of Silly Walks, where he too performed a stupid and absurd walk. This allusion would take us back to the metalevel input of the Englishness and their culture, which I strongly believe is a métier of the English, namely to constantly throw backwards and forwards between the comedy medium and the general idea of culture, life and society in the British Isles. Not only, then, do we have the genre of a movie present here, but via the slapstick, we are allowed to join with the gesture and clowning conduct, which surely enriches the verbal level of the joking communication, and also the visual. All this is linked with the metacognition and metacommunication on the part of the viewers of the sitcom, which in turn allows for the intrersection of the cultural life and references to Englishness and English kind of humour. All this complex referencing, can be presented by means of CIT, with multiple blends boosted via intersubjectivity and multimodality (see Figure 2). The graphic representation below, therefore, represents the 3D image of English humour, with numerous layers and intersections between these.

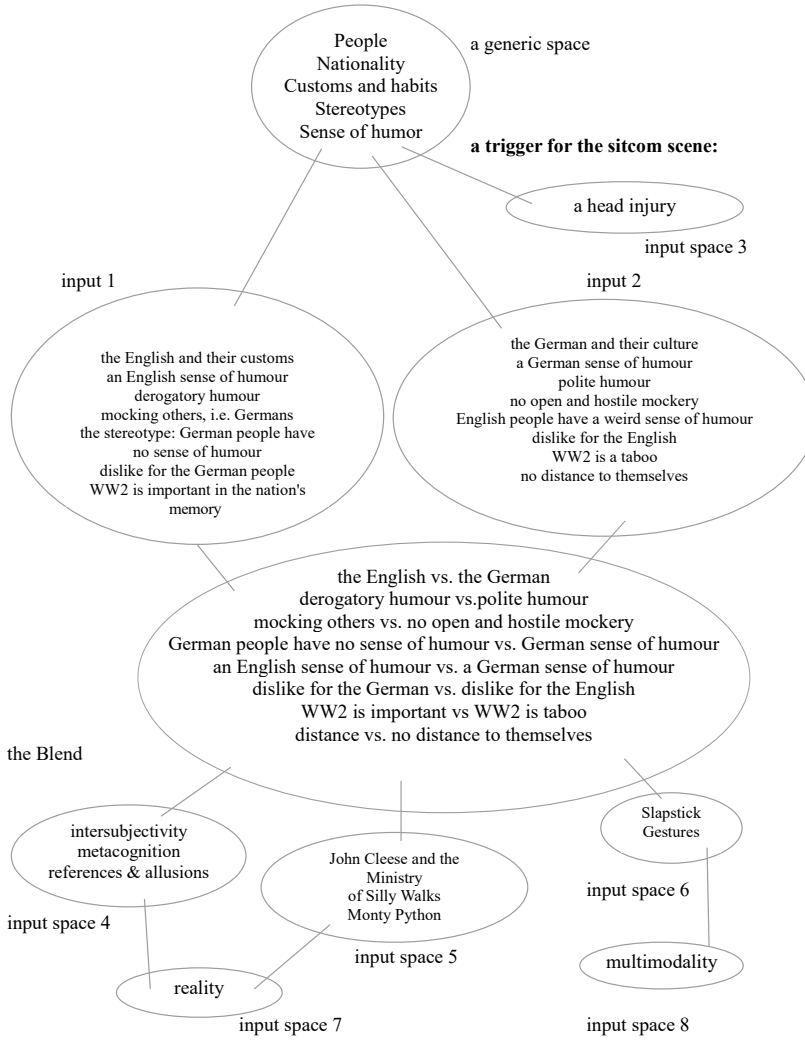

Figure 2. Don't mention the war – conceptual integration in Fawlty Towers.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

To recap, in English humour there are layers of mental spaces that interlink, and this layering, which usually is not clear for non-native English people, will bear a special meaning for the English who love the mechanism. In fact, the more the layers the better. This

entails that numerous levels of diverse input spaces within comedy are to be blended and further reformulated, reconceptualised and extended via the running of the blend in real time.

Nonetheless, it would be beneficial to conduct more research in this field and inspect other kinds of humour, e.g. Polish humour, and other formats of comedy such as stand-up, one-liners or Internet humour, with the above depicted cognitive tools. It would ensure the contrastive evidence and it would certainly give far more insight into the effectiveness and usability of the depicted methods with regard to humour studies.

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