European ethnic scripts and the translation and switching of jokes

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Abstract

Many European jokes depend on local ethnic scripts that by convention pin a comic characteristic on a particular ethnic group such as the canny Cardi in Wales, the slow Swiss in France, the stupid Belgian incessantly eating freedom fries in the Netherlands. How are such jokes to be translated into the language of another country with a different culture and comic conventions? Sometimes it is straightforward because similar jokes about the same group exist throughout Europe as with, say, jokes about cowardly Italians. In other cases there exists a similar set of jokes told about a local group so that, say, British jokes about the stupid Irish can easily be turned into jokes about Belgians, Ostfrieslanders, Gallegos, Pontians in the appropriate country. Problems arise only if a script is unique to one group or country, in which case the device of indirect explanation by internal conversation is used. One of the people in the joke reveals to another the nature of the script on which the joke depends, and thus the joke teller conveys the information to his audience without appearing didactic or giving too much away. It is fairly easy to convey implicit cultural assumptions in this way, far easier than it is translate a complex play on words. Language is far more idiosyncratic and arbitrary than culture.

Keywords: French; Jews; jokes; scripts; Swiss; translation; Welsh.

Many jokes depend upon relatively fixed ethnic scripts (Raskin 1985) in which, for the purposes of the joke, a comic quality is conventionally ascribed to a particular group. Within Europe we find that in the Netherlands the Belgians are held to be stupid and to eat chips (frites, frieten,

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French fries, freedom fries), in Britain and Ireland, the Scots are depicted as canny (crafty, calculating, stingy), in France the Swiss are represented as slow and stodgy and throughout Europe there are jokes about the Italians being cowardly (Davies 1990, 1998, 2002). How are these jokes to be translated, moved from one language and culture to another?

There are essentially three cases with which the translator will be confronted. First, there are "transposable jokes", those where a script is either shared between countries or is easily available to those who have no experience of the jokes but knows of the historical events that make them understandable. Second, there are "switchable jokes", jokes that exist in one European country but have a more or less exact equivalent in another in which they are pinned on a local group within the second country. Finally, there are the "problematic" jokes and scripts which are confined to one country, indeed unique to that country and which in consequence pose particular problems. These patterns are not specifically European for, as we shall see, the same types of jokes often exist in countries in North and South America, the Middle East, South Asia, South Africa and Australia and New Zealand, and the account I shall give applies to these countries also. It does not apply to East Asia where the forms of humor are very different and special difficulties arise (Davies and Abe 2003).

The first kind of jokes are the easiest to deal with because they are easily understandable throughout most of Europe and indeed also the English-speaking world. Two of the most obvious examples are the jokes dealing with Italian cowardice and German militarism. The original comic scripts of the jokes are hundreds of years old and they probably originated in France. Both Italian military ineffectiveness and German militarism feature strongly in the works of the Czech humorous writer Jaroslav Hašek about the Good Soldier Švejk (Hašek 1974, 1983) written both before and just after World War I. The jokes attained very widespread circulation after World War II. The events and experiences of that war have dominated the collective European memory ever since. Even if the details are perceived differently from one country to another, the stories of Italian retreat and defeat and of German organization, dedication, efficiency and atrocities are universally known, accepted and seen as significant throughout Europe. They have been reinforced not only by history teaching in schools but by endless memoirs, television documentaries, fiction and in Britain even in sit-coms such as *'Allo 'Allo* or *Dad's Army*. Jokes about Italian military ineffectiveness are common in English, French,

German, Greek and Slovak (*Anekdoty, Slunne Italie*; Clément 1945; Gamm 1979; Thomas 1944; Wilde 1975) and about German militarism in Dutch, English, French, German, Italian and Norwegian (*Die besten Soldatenwitze* 1982; Gamm 1979; Irwin 1972; Kilgariff 1979; Raskin 1985; Romorantin 1983). The examples given below could be switched between languages and cultures throughout Europe and would remain both comprehensible and funny.

(1) The Italians have invented a new dance, the dance of retreat. The steps are: one step forward, two steps back, look over your shoulder, push your partner forward and once more from the beginning (Gamm 1979: 123. Author's translation from the German).

(2) A group of Germans who were sun-bathing on an Italian beach realised that a three year old German child had got lost. Their leader announced to the Italians around them, "If he is not returned within ten minutes we will lose ten Italian children (Romorantin 1983: 63–64 — see also *Ridere, Ridere, Ridere*. Author's translation from the Italian).

(3) An Italian officer dissatisfied with his country's military reputation leaped out of the trench's and cried to his men, "*Avanti! Avanti!*". No-one moved. Again he cried bravely, "*Avanti! Avanti!*". Again no-one moved. For a third time he called out, "*Avanti! Avanti!*" and a voice from the trenches called out "*Ah che bella voce*" (British 1970s. Also in *Anekdoty Slunné Itálie*, 1978, and in French in Chrestien 1957 and Clément 1945).

(4) In 1940, not knowing what to do next in order to invade Britain, Hitler decided to drain the English Channel. He massed a million German soldiers on the coast of Normandy, each man standing exactly one metre behind the man in front and on the command of the officers — *eins, zwei, drei* — each line of men stepped forward and swallowed three mouthfuls of sea-water. During the whole of the first day the operation went very well but as the sun set an evening breeze blew across from the English coast a steady change of "one, two, three — pee!" (Nègre 1973, vol. 1: 84. Author's translation from the French).[1]

The second category of jokes are those where local equivalents exist in many countries and languages. Examples of these are the "stupid" and "canny" scripts used in jokes throughout Europe and indeed much of the rest of the world as indicated in Table 1 (Davies 1990, 2002) below.

Table 1. *Stupid and canny jokes by country*

Country where both "stupid" and "canny" jokes are told	Identity of "stupid" group in jokes	Identity of "canny" group in jokes
United States	Poles (and others locally, e.g. Italians, Portugese)	Jews, Scots, New England Yankees, Iowans
Canada (East)	Newfies (Newfoundlanders)	Jews, Scots, Nova Scotians
Canada (West)	Ukrainians	Jews, Scots
Mexico	Yucatcocos from Yucatan, Gallegos from Galicia in Spain	Regiomontanos, the citizens of Monterrey
Columbia	Pastusos from Pasto in Nariño	Paisas from Antioquia
England	Irish	Scots, Jews
Wales	Irish	Cardis from Ceredigion, Scots, Jews
Scotland	Irish	Aberdonians, Jews
Ireland	Kerrymen	Scots, Jews
France	Belgians, French Swiss	Auvergnats from the Auvergne, Scots, Jews
Netherlands	Belgians, Limburghers	Scots, Jews
Germany	Ostfrieslanders, Saxons	Swabians, Scots, Jews
Italy	Southern Italians	Milanese, Genovese, Florentines, Scots, Jews
Switzerland	Fribourgers/Freiburgers	Jews, Genevans, Balois
Spain	Gallegos from Galicia, Leperos, the people of Lepe In Andalucia	Catalans
Finland	Karelians. People from province of Hame	Laihians from Laihia
Bulgaria	Sopi, the peasants from the rural area outside Sofia	Gabrovonians from Gabrovo, Armenians
Greece	Pontians (Black Sea Greeks)	Armenians
India	Sardarjis (Sikhs)	Gujaratis, Sindis
Pakistan	Sardarjis (Sikhs)	Hindus, especially Gujaratis
Iran	Rashtis from Rasht, Turks	Armenians, Isfahanis, from Isfahan
Nigeria	Hausas	Ibos
South Africa	Afrikaners (van der Merwe)	Jews, Scots
Australia	Irish, Tasmanians	Jews, Scots
New Zealand	Irish, Maoris, West Coasters, (in the South Island)	Jews, Scots, Dutch

The possibility of switching stupidity and canny jokes to another local target when translating has been noted by translators but only in a rather sporadic way. In his essay *Traductabilitė d'enonces humoristiques en finnois* (Tukia 2001: 368–369), Marc Tukia has, for example, noted that

jokes about the reputedly avaricious people of Laihia in Finland can be switched to the Auvergnats or the Scots when the jokes are translated from Finnish into French. Likewise, Marguerite Gricourt in her article *De la traduction du "double sense" dans des devinettes et les plaisanteries en Hindi* (Gricourt 2001: 114) has noted that Hindi jokes about simple-minded Sikhs can be applied to Belgians when the jokes are translated into French. However, Table 1 provides the basis for doing this systematically, so that German *Ostfriesenwitze* can be rendered into Danish as jokes about Aarhus or into Spanish as jokes about Lepe or into Greek as Pontian jokes or switched to the people of Fribourg/Freiburg in Switzerland. There is little difficulty in doing this except when the jokes rely on a play on words that exists only in one of the languages. Increasingly stupidity jokes are based on a mockery of a failure to understand universally known aspects of the generally known about material world rather than purely local aspects of a particular country's language or customs). In consequence, they are easy to switch and easy to translate.

(5) A qualified Belgian/Irish pilot was explaining to a new trainee how to fly the plane at night. "You see the red light on the left wing?"
"Yes".
"You see that green light on the right wing?"
"Yes".
"Well night flying is very easy. You just fly between the two lights" (Van der Boute-Hen Train 1978: 10. Author's translation from the French.)

(6) How do you recognize a Belgian/Irishman in a submarine?
He's the one with the parachute on his back (Isnard 1979: 109. Author's translation from the French.)

Nonetheless, there are a substantial number of jokes about stupidity that depend on a play on words and these can cause problems. A good example may be adapted from Françoise Vreck's essay *Fidelité en Humour* (Fabrice and Wood 1999: 32) which can be treated as a British joke about a stupid Irishman that in France would have been applied to a Belgian. The translation is sufficiently tricky for her to make two attempts at it:

(7) (An Irishman) bought a bath and was just leaving the shop with his purchase when the shop assistant called "Do you want a plug?"
"Why?" asked the man, "Is it electric?"

> Premier traduction:
> (Un Belge) achète une baignoire et au moment ou il quitte le magasin avec son achat, le vendeur l'interpelle:
> Il vous faut pas de joint?
> Porquoi elle fume?
>
> Deuxieme traduction:
> (Un Belge) achète une baignoire et au moment ou il quitte le magasin avec son achat, le vendeur l'interpelle:
> Vous n'avez pas besoin d'une bonde?
> Une blonde dans la baignoire? Porquoi pas? (Vreck 1999: 31)

However, the problem is not specific to jokes depending on this kind of script. All jokes involving a play on words can prove difficult to translate or even untranslatable whereas, as we shall see later, jokes using unfamiliar scripts can be moved between cultures without too much difficulty provided the listener or reader is given the necessary information in his or her own language. Tukia (2001), for example, is quite wrong to assert that it is difficult to convey the meaning of French humor about *le mari trompé* (the cuckolded husband) to Scandinavian readers who have different sexual mores. The Scandinavians are quite capable of realizing that matters are ordered differently in France and laughing appropriately in exactly the same way that English readers or audiences can laugh at Shakespeare or Ben Jonson or Sheridan. If we can laugh at the past which "is another country" then we can laugh at another country which is another country. It is not difficult to comprehend the distinctively French world of Feydeau or Rabelais in which wifely infidelity is both common and concealed, both feared and reprehensible and yet also amusing when some other husband is the victim. Even those who dwell in countries where wives are uniformly chaste or else openly wanton can understand this humor of deception because deception is funny in and of itself. It is possible to laugh at and with the French without being French. By contrast, humor depending on the use of the French language may require so thorough a knowledge of French that you would almost have to become French to acquire it. Language is the most arbitrary and idiosyncratic of all aspects of a particular culture.

Even if a country lacks a local group about whom stupidity jokes are customarily told, Table 1 enables us to invent one. It is clear from the table that *in general* the butts of stupidity jokes live on the periphery of a country or culture and speak the language of the center in a distinctive

and distorted way; they tend also to be rustics or economic migrants who take on menial blue-collar jobs and in both Europe and North America are often Roman Catholics. Within any country it should be possible to find a national, ethnic, regional or local group that fits this pattern and on whom stupidity jokes can plausibly be pinned, even if they had never been the butt of such jokes before. Every country or culture has a center and a periphery, a center to laugh and a periphery to be laughed at.

In the case of the canny jokes there is often no suitable local group who can be the butt of such jokes to compare with the Cardis in Wales or the Auvergnats in France or the Gabrovonians in Bulgaria. However, many countries have a Jewish minority and thus jokes about Jews move easily from one country to another. Also the drive to tell canny jokes is so strong that the Scots have become the butt of canny jokes in countries as diverse as Slovakia, Sweden, Italy and Croatia where the local people have had little contact with Scotland. They know of Scotland in that they know it is a real and significant country and they know the British and Irish convention of telling canny jokes about the Scots. There is thus no need for any switching and Scottish jokes can be retained intact in almost any country in Europe and indeed throughout much of the world. There are merely curious minor differences in the names and settings used between one country and another. In Britain and particularly in Scotland, where the setting for the jokes is often Aberdeen, the granite city, the home of the Gordons and the Robertsons, whereas the significance of choosing this small city would be lost in Europe. In Europe it would make more sense to use Edinburgh or even Glasgow. Likewise many of the Scottish surnames used in English jokes about the Scots, names like Campbell or Menzies may not be recognized as Scottish in Europe. French jokes tend to use a limited number of Scottish surnames all beginning with "Mac", MacGregor being particularly favored and usually spelled with a gap between the Mac and the Gregor as if it were Mac Gregor. However, these are minor points. Everyone in Europe knows and uses the jokes about the Scots, partly as a result of the dominant influence of the English-speaking countries' humor and partly because the Scots are easy to depict in cartoons. When in doubt reach for the canny Scotsman.

The third category of jokes depends on scripts that are only known locally and do not exist in other countries, which can create problems when rendering them comprehensible abroad. The example discussed here will be French jokes about the Swiss being slow. (Others might be German

jokes about dirty Turks, *Tűrkenwitze*, French jokes about lazy Corsicans or British jokes about the criminality of West Indians or Liverpudlians.) Sometimes, the jokes take a straight-forward material form. It is not necessary, for example, in translating jokes like the one below to smuggle in the information that *les petits Suisses* are seen as slow in order that the joke be seen as funny:

(8) Un Suisse rencontre un ami. Soudain il se retourne et écrase du pied un escargot:
– Porquoi fais-tu ça? lui demande son interlocuteur
– J'en avais assez repond-il, cela fait trois heures qu'il me suit!
(Isnard 1977)

A Swiss met one of his friends. While they were speaking he suddenly turned round and stamped on a snail.
"Why did you do that?", asked his friend.
"I'd had enough!", he replied, "he'd been following me for three hours". (Author's translation)

However, what is to be done when the slowness is merely implied by the behavior and demeanor of the Swiss actors in the jokes?

(9) Un Francais pénètre chez un cordonnier Suisse, une paire de chaussures a la main. Il lui demande de changer le talon droit, ressemeler le gauche, poser des fers à l'une mais pas à la autre. Le Suisse se retourne alors et dit:
– Entrez! (Isnard 1977)

A Frenchman went into a Swiss cobbler's shop with a pair of shoes in his hand. He asked him to put a new heel on the right one and resole the left and to add a metal strip to one but not the other. The Swiss turned round and said, "Come in!"

It is an exceptionally funny joke even in English but can it be comprehended immediately by the listener who does not know the conventional French comic script to the effect that the Swiss are slow? Without access to this knowledge, the joke is a mere piece of foolishness and lacks the punch and originality of the original. The problem facing someone who decided to tell the joke in English in, say, Wales or Ireland is that the local people would not know the comic convention involved, though they might understand the joke because they, like the French, value quickness in speech. However, the Welsh and the Irish do not have a tradition of telling jokes about other slower-speaking groups. The joke would work

best in Finland where slowness jokes are already told about the people of Tampere. Elsewhere, for example among English aristocrats, it is considered dignified, wise and measured to speak slowly, in contrast to what are seen as the jabbering Frenchman or the Welsh wind-bag. Thus there can be the added problem that slowness of speech may be a valued quality and not a source of amusement; in such a case not only information about the French script but about the French evaluation of the script would have to be smuggled in by the joketeller. Some English jokes are exactly the opposite of the French ones; in these jokes a voluble Celtic speaker speaks too quickly and ties himself up in a contradiction:

(10) A train had a ten minute stop at a junction and an Irishman went into the station bar for a drink. As he was finishing his third Guinness, he realised that the train was leaving. He ran down the platform after it, shouting, "Stop, stop, there's a man on board who has been left behind". (British 1920s)

(11) During the dispute over the disestablishment of the Anglican church in Wales, David Lloyd George spoke in the hall of a chapel in a small Welsh village. A Nonconformist worthy introduced him, saying: "Well we all heard the disgraceful remarks made last week by the Bishop of St. Asaph's, whom I have to say is the biggest liar in creation. Fortunately, we have here tonight Mr. David Lloyd George, who will be more than a match for him". (Davies 1978; see also Coulton 1945)

Some jokes involving local knowledge are easy to translate in such a way that they work. It can be done by restructuring a short joke (for example a riddle joke) as a longer narrative joke in which an extra person is introduced to whom the necessary information is *directly* conveyed, thus conveying it *indirectly* to the listener without appearing didactic. Another technique is for the speaker to feign naivity and to explain to his audience how the foreigners enlightened him. Marc Tukia (2001: 362) has, for example, grossly over-estimated the difficulty of getting foreigners to laugh at French and Dutch jokes about the Belgians love of eating chips (*frites* /*frieten*/ French fries/ freedom fries). Let us consider how an Englishman who had heard the joke below in the Netherlands would re-phrase it to tell it in England:

(12) Where is the biggest chip-shop in Europe?
On the border between France and the Netherlands.

What is needed is an extra explanatory line at the beginning of the joke that does not undermine it but which renders the eventual punch-line fully intelligible and then to tell the entire joke poker-faced but with a hint of humor. The joke should be told as if it were a true story; it should become a solemn wind-up that everyone suspects may become a joke but isn't quite sure:

(13) Englishman: "I was in Holland last week and a Dutchman told me something quite amazing. He said that the Dutch despise the Belgians as crude plebs who always guzzle chips with everything. He then asked me "Where is the biggest chip shop in Europe?". Before I could reply, he said, "On the border between France and the Netherlands".

It is a very familiar trick that is regularly used by the tellers of Jewish jokes who with characteristic generosity want them to be accessible to the goyim. Consider, for example, the following joke which was told to the author in English by a distinguished Yiddish-speaking Cambridge educated rabbi who would have known it originally as a joke in Yiddish from Poland. It makes assumptions about the common understandings of teller and listener:

(14) Three Hasidim are boasting about their Rebbes. The first says, "My Rebbe is so great. One Friday afternoon he was in his carriage an hour's ride from home, with just an hour to Shabbes, when a terrible storm arose with hail and thunder and lightning and they couldn't move. The Rebbe got up and said: 'Storm to the right and storm to the left and clear in the middle'. And a miracle happened: the storm continued to his right and to his left, but a clear path opened up in front of them and they got home just in time for Shabbes". The second says: "That's nothing. One Friday afternoon *my* Rebbe was in his carriage an hour's ride from home, with just an hour to Shabbes, when a terrible fog came up. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. They couldn't see which way was home. The Rebbe got up and said: 'Fog to the right, and fog to the left, and clear in the middle. And a miracle happened. The fog continued to the right and to the left but a path of visibility opened in front of them and they could drive through the fog and get home just in time for Shabbes".
The third says: "That's nothing. One Friday afternoon *my* Rebbe was in his carriage two hours' ride from home, with just one minute

> to Shabbes, and the Rebbe got up and said 'Shabbes to the right and Shabbes to the left and Chol (any non-sacred day) in between'. And a miracle happened: it was Shabbes to his right and Shabbes to his left but in the middle it was still Friday''. (Eastern Europe traditional).

Let us now look at its descendant, told generations later in England, a joke that is accessible to Jews and non-Jews alike. Jews may regret that it has lost some of its Jewish flavor (and indeed the absurd reference to St. Anthony is Christian and Roman Catholic) but it is funny for both Jews and gentiles:

(15) A Protestant minister, a Roman Catholic priest and a rabbi were talking about the miracles they had experienced. The minister said: ''I was once travelling on a plane when all the engines cut out one by one and we were falling out of the sky. I prayed and prayed to God and then one of the engines began to work again and we were able to land safely. It was a miraculous response to my prayers''. The priest then said: ''Once I was walking along the edge of a cliff when I stumbled and fell down towards the beach. I cried out 'St. Anthony save me, I'm lost' and to my amazement, I landed on a holiday maker's trampoline. The rabbi listened with interest to his colleagues' stories and said, ''I was walking to the synagogue one Saturday when I saw a large bundle of banknotes lying at the side of the road and, as you know, I'm not allowed to carry money on the Sabbath. So I prayed and prayed and suddenly for a hundred yards around me it was Tuesday''.

The key line that is necessary for the gentile, though not Jewish listeners, is the one where the rabbi says ''As you know, I'm not allowed to carry money on the Sabbath''. It conveys the information necessary if the gentiles are to grasp the full humor of the joke but this is not done directly. The information is conveyed indirectly via the minister and the priest. They do not otherwise contribute much to the joke other than being part of a familiar one, two, three sequence but here they are also essential as a parabolic mirror off which the rabbi's knowledge is bounced to the listener. The rabbi also does them the courtesy of saying ''as you know'', thus hiding the didactic conveying of the necessary information even more thoroughly. It is also worth noting that this version has a punchline that now embodies two Jewish scripts at once, the canny script and

the Sabbath-breaking script (curiously the same combination is to be found in Scottish and Welsh jokes).

Where the potential understanding of a script by an audience from one group might be impeded by differences in knowledge and cultural assumptions there are, then, often ways in which a translator can surmount this. What is really tricky is when this problem is fused with the far more difficult problem of how to translate a subtle play on words:

(16) On croit généralment que l'inscription S.B.B. — C.F.F. qui figure sur les wagons des trains suisses signifie Chemins de Fer Fédéraux. En réalitée cela veut dire: c'est bas bossible, ça fa fite (Isnard 1979: 19)

Most people think that the letters S.B.B. — C.F.F. on the trains of the Swiss Federal railroad stand for Schweizerische Bundesbahn, Chemins de Fer Fédéraux. They actually mean, 'Shlowly, bush bast, coings fast's forbidden'.

In countries distant from Switzerland, no-one knows what is written on the wagons of Swiss trains nor what the letters stand for and do not know the French humorous script about the slow speech of the Swiss. However, the main difficulty arises with the words in French which mean, "It isn't possible for it to go fast". In order to fit the French phrase to the letters S.B.B. — C.F.F. the pronunciation of *c'est* which sounds like an *S* is used, *va* becomes *fa* and *vite* becomes *fite*, *pas* becomes *bas* and *possible* becomes *bossible*. In doing so an imitation is made of a Swiss speaking French slowly with characteristic mispronunciations. A crisp French *p* becomes a slurred, tired *b*. How can you convey this subtle mixture of scripts (slow reality, slow speech and slurred speech) in a punchline in a foreign language? The author has attempted it above in English but how, if at all, could it be done in Erse or Estonian? Even if old Estonians brush up their Erse, it could be difficult.

Within a Europe which since the collapse of Soviet socialism has been a relatively homogeneous continent, the switching of jokes involving standard scripts between cultures and languages is a reasonably straightforward matter. Where a script is shared between countries as with German militarism or the canny Scotsman, the jokes can be switched from one country to another with ease, though great care has to be exercised over details if the full force and flavor of the joke is to be retained. In the case of jokes where an equivalent script exists in each country, as in the case of stupidity jokes, then again switching is not problematic. Even if the jokes

do not exist in the second country and cultures, once the social rules that shape the selection of a butt for the jokes are known, a suitable local target can be chosen. The difficult case is the one where a script is unique to a particular culture as with French jokes about the slow Swiss. Sometimes the solution lies in lengthening the narrative and introducing an additional character into it to whom the hidden assumptions of the joke are then explained. The biggest difficulties encountered will, though, not stem from the comic ethnic scripts but from the use in the scripts of the idiosyncratic qualities of a particular language which can not easily be reproduced in another language.

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1. The officer would, of course, have given the command as "*eins, zwo, drei*", so as to avoid any confusing of the similar sounding *zwei* and *drei* by the men, a problem that does not exist in French. However, I have kept the version given in the original French joke as being the French as well as the English image of the German sequence that corresponds to the English one, two, three.

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