

Sick Disaster Jokes as a Cultural Phenomenon

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(Opole)

“Media disasters” have regularly led to widely traveled, documented cycles of jokes. It is astonishing that *sick jokes* – the ones ridiculing death, diseases, deformations, handicaps and different sufferings (Herzog, Bush 1994) – are not frequent in Poland, quite contrary to their popularity in the British and American societies. Out of ten very well known cycles of sick disaster jokes – neither – starting from 1963 JFK assassination till 1997 Princess Diana’s death and 2000 Concorde airline crash – was popular in Poland.

The questions I would like to ask are the following: Do we – the Poles – have our own subject that could be used in these types of jokes? Why are certain sick disaster jokes not commonly known even with the wide access to satellite TV and web-sites? How do the American jokes influence the sick jokes popularity in Poland?

The same year when Diana’s jokes were proliferating elsewhere but not in Poland we had our flood of 1997 – a “perfect” disaster to be described in sick disaster jokes. Several people were drowned, and many thousands lost their homes. The sufferings and material loss were great. As expected, such jokes indeed appeared as a response to the destruction made by the flood wave in July. Those jokes were popular among the people waiting on the roofs for supplies of food and cigarettes. One could hear them or read them on the websites together with the news about the level of water in the Odra river. Nevertheless, the flood jokes were not as cruel as the British or the American sick disaster jokes. They pictured water but did not use the scripts taken from aggressive cartoons or computer games i.e. blood, a deformation, and ugliness.

1)

Jedzie facet samochodem, widzi pływający kapelusz i woła:

– Podwieźć pana?

– Nie, dziękuję, jestem na rowerze.

Heard 1997

A man driving a car can see a floating hat. He calls:

– Do you want a lift?

– No, thanks. I am cycling.

2)

– Jak ci się powodzi? – Dziękuję, nie przelewa się. www.nntonosplywam

– How are you doing? – Thanks, I can make the ends meet.

The flood jokes were mainly verbal ones. A word play seems to be easier acceptable in sick jokes as it points out the surface level of texts. The jokes sometimes fill up the typically Polish abstract jokes schemata about a woman (the so called “baba”) who comes to a doctor:

3)

Przychodzi baba do lekarza i mówi:

– Mam wodę w kolanie.

A lekarz na to:

– A ja w kuchni.

A woman comes to a doctor and says:

– I have water in my knee (hydrarthrosis)

The doctor answers:

– And I have it in my kitchen.

4)

Przychodzi baba do lekarza, a lekarz na to:

– Co pani dolega?

– Mam Odrę w domu.

A woman comes to a doctor and he asks her:

– What’s the matter with you?

– I have the Odra (river/ measles) at home.

Most flood jokes based on a verbal play were not tasteless. Nevertheless, they were perceived as being tactless when told to the sufferers. The flood jokes were mostly seen as rude and primitive and made the recipients hesitate if they should laugh after hearing them. Only some people were brave enough to tell the flood jokes and were not scared of hurting the feelings of the flood victims.

It is possible that the differences between the Polish and the American or the English types of humor are connected with the different ability of separating jokes from the reality they are pointing at. An attitude to the dead is another aspect. It indicates the system of values hidden behind the subject of the death issue. The problem of treating death is reflected among others in traditional ways of celebrating the memory of those who passed away. All Saints Day and All Souls Day are diffe-

rent from the colorful and jolly day of ghost and witches Halloween – celebrated in England and the United States. Halloween is in those countries a good excuse to send ghostly postcards with wishes, to watch horror movies or tell black humor jokes. Recently, as American influence is getting stronger and stronger, the Halloween parties and spooky tricks become more and more popular especially among Polish children.

Traditionally, however, the day is still very serious and melancholic in Poland. Whole families go to cemeteries to lit up candles and bring flowers for their dead. Sometimes they travel hundreds of kilometres to see the graves of the close ones. The roads are always jammed and the graveyards are overcrowded. Extra parking lots are arranged and the traffic is changed specially for this day. People walk solemnly and sadly thinking or praying for their passed away family members, neighbours, and acquaintances. If someone does not have a person to visit on cemetery and is not able to travel they go to the nearest graveyard to pay tribute to the unknown or forgotten tombs of strangers.

The belief in saints and the life of the dead after death is strongly rooted in Catholicism that does not allow making fun of the deceased. The respect of the good memory of the dead is an immanent element of the Polish culture. Poles tend not to tell bad things about the deceased no matter what they thought about them when they were alive. The memory of the dead is worshiped and „holly”. The respect is shown by using the phrase “świętej pamięci” (of holly memory) or “niech spoczywa w pokoju” (let him/her rest in peace) or “pokój jego duszy” (peace to his/her soul) before or after the name of the deceased one. The author of *Xenophobic guide to Poles* is right in saying: “In Poland the only way to ensure continued popularity is to be dead. Then your portrait will be hung everywhere and streets will be named after you” (Lipniacka 1997: 49).

The cultural difference is seen also in the jokes that appeared after September 11. The scripts of the American jokes are more picturesque than the Polish ones. Hearing the jokes, we see the images of the damaged bodies, and people dying with some of their parts shattered. The picture of the burned bodies is very suggestive in these jokes:

5)

Nie potrzeba już żadnych ochotników do pomocy przy WTC: znaleziono 5000 dodatkowych par rąk...

They do not need any more volunteers to help at the WTC: they have found 5000 extra pairs of hands...

www.spinemagazine.com

- 6)
- Dlaczego policjanci i strażacy Nowego Jorku są najlepsi?
 - Zostali przepuszczeni przez sito.
- Why are police and firemen New York's finest?
- Because now you can run them through a sieve.
www.spinemagazine.com

- 7)
- W restauracji WTC są trzy różne rodzaje sal: dla palących, niepalących i spalonych nie do rozpoznania.
- At the World Trade Center restaurant, they offered three seating areas: smoking, non-smoking and burned beyond recognition.
www.spinemagazine.com

I was unable to find Polish jokes similar to the above mentioned ones. The jokes that circulate in Poland do not seem to be very different from their American versions but usually are of a milder type. Many of them deal with flights or planes:

- 8)
- Stoi dwóch koleś przed windą w WTC. Podchodzi trzeci i pyta:
- Panowie czekają na windę czy na samolot?
<http://www.dowcipland.g3.pl/dowci-py/binladen.html>
- Two fellows are standing in front of the lift in WTC. The third one appears and asks:
- Are you waiting for the lift or for the plane?
Some of them illustrate a fear of Muslims

- 9)
- Szczyt dyskomfortu?
- Siedzieć w samolocie obok koleśia czytającego Koran...
[Http://www.kki.net.pl/~nightmeen/binladen.html](http://www.kki.net.pl/~nightmeen/binladen.html)
- What is the biggest possible discomfort?
- To sit on the plane next to a person, who is reading the Koran.

And make fun of people ready to make an explosive suicide – like the following one based on a word play:

- 10)
- Jedzie dwóch Arabów, jeden do drugiego:
-Możesz mnie wysadzić pod ambasadą.
<http://pikasso.pl/~urb/dowcipy1.php>
- Two Arabs are going by car together. One to the other says:
- You could drop me out/blow me up in front of the embassy.

Jokes showing the American power and its future success are eagerly told by Poles. Some of them are a straight forward threat to the Arab world. The sound aspect of the next joke in Polish is interesting, as the rhyme *turbaniel Manhattanie* occurs here:

11)

Jaki jest szczyt odwagi?

-What is the sign of the highest possible courage?

-Przejdźcie w turbanie po Manhattanie.

- To cross Manhattan wearing a turban.

<http://www.kki.net.pl/~nightmeen/bin-laden.html>

As with the Challenger disaster (Oring 1992), such an event was deemed viewable because the specifics of death were left to the audience's imagination. And people tried to visualize the last moments in the jokes. The recordings of the last messages were on air showing the grief of the family and of the closest relatives as well as the real photos of people from the planes and their farewell voices on the answering machines. It made us think about the unpredictability of death. The reflection that each call could be the last one was very strong. Since that day I personally allowed my students to answer their cellular phones during my classes – because whenever I heard a mobile ring I could remember that it might be a last chance for someone to say goodbye – even if not as a victim of terrorism but of an “ordinary” car crash or any other accident. It made me realize that these things happen and we never know where and when the death awaits us or our dearest ones.

The jokes fulfill their role of taking an image that embodies a current threat and defuse it by turning it, at least partially, into a joke. It can be also seen in “anthrax” jokes that appeared just after the WCT ones. They were intertwined more strictly with the language and types of texts rooted in Polish tradition. The danger of the consequences of biological weapon use seemed far more real, and the fear was more overwhelming for the Poles than the possibilities of suicidal bombs or plane hijacks occurrence on our territory. As there are no real chances to fight the disease wide-spreading, the only thing people could do to overcome the hysteria was to tell jokes. Many “anthrax jokes” are based on a Polish world-play, traditional nursery rhymes and children poems. Unsurprisingly, Osama Bin Laden's name is present in them:

12)

Wyliczanka Osamy:

Osama's nursery rhyme:

Entliczek, pentliczek, czerwony stoliczek,

Entlitschek, pentlitschek, a little red table

Na kogo wypadnie,

Whose turn it is

Na tego wagiczek...
<http://pikasso.pl/~urb/dowcipy1.php>

13)

Kto ty jesteś? Wagiczek mały.
 Jaki znak twój? Proszek biały.
 Czy zabijasz? Problem żaden.
 Kto twym panem? Osama Bin Laden.
<http://www.kki.net.pl/~nightmeen/bin-laden.html>

14)

Przychodzi wagiczek do wagiczka, patrzą, a tam, co? Osama!

15)

Wiecie co ma osa?
 Osa ma bin laden
<http://www.kki.net.pl/~nightmeen/bin-laden.html>

Anthrax on him...

Who are you? A small anthrax.
 What is your sign? White powder.
 Do you kill? No problem.
 Who is your master? Osama bin Laden.
 Pure-nonsense jokes:

An anthrax comes to an anthrax, they look and what do they see? Osama!

Do you know what osa (a wasp) has got?
 – Osa (wasp) has bin laden.

As Christie Davies (1999) argues, “the flourishing of jokes about specific shocking events in the last thirty years or so is a product of the rise of the mass media and in particular of television and of the direct, dogmatic and yet ambiguous and paradoxical way in which accidents and disasters are presented to the public by the media”. The pictures and messages about the traumatic events travel around the world – but even if the emotions they evoke are equally strong the reaction in the types of jokes could be different.

At the same time when the world was infecting us with the fear of the biological weapon, our own media were showing to the Poles a new danger that seemed even closer and more real. Under the headline of “Łowcy skór” ‘Skin hunters’ the case of trading corpses in Łódź public ambulance service was announced (“Gazeta Wyborcza”, 23.01.2002). The ambulance crew – dispatchers, orderlies and doctors – were accused of trading the information about deaths to undertakers. The new director of Łódź ambulance service informed the police about the case which was thought to have lasted for ten years. Prosecutors intended to bring to court about 50 people engaged in the trade. It is claimed that the ambulance crew used to delay the time of arrival to the patients. Moreover, they often gave deliberately a medicine causing death. Jokes and funny SMSes started to circulate:

16)

Kocham twoje ciało...

I love your body...

... Łódzkie pogotowie [http://upaity.w.in-
teria.pl/sms/hard.html](http://upaity.w.in-
teria.pl/sms/hard.html)

...Łódź ambulance service...

There is a possibility that the members of the squad used to kill to acquire the corpses. They were paid about almost a double salary of an average worker for the information. One of the doctors was nicknamed *Anioł śmierci* 'The Angel of Death'. The dead person was called *skóra* i.e. a 'skin'.

17)

Przychodzi metal na pogotowie:

A heavy-metal fan comes to an ambulance station and says:

– Dzień dobry, chciałem kupić skórę.

– Good morning. I would like to buy a skin (=leather jacket).

[groups.google.com/pl/
pl.listserv.chomor](http://groups.google.com/pl/pl.listserv.chomor)

They overused medicine called *pavulon*. It is a drug that paralyzes patients to prevent them from moving. The breath stops but the heart keeps working and the patient can still hear what is going around. Pavulon originates from an Indian poison curare. A poisoned person throttles but is conscious till the end of the life.

18)

– Gdzie jedziemy? -pyta pacjent w karetce pogotowia.

–Where are we going to? – asks a patient in an ambulance.

– Do kostnicy.

– To a mortuary.

– Ale ja jeszcze nie umarłem!

– But I haven't died yet.

– A my jeszcze nie dojechalismy. Heard

– But we haven't arrived yet.

02.2002

A dosage of pavulon depends on the anesthetic used, individual needs, and responses and should be given only by anesthesiologists or cardiologists in reanimation units, intensive care, operating theatres. It is given to critically ill patients so that they can breathe with the ventilator or respirator. It should be given in ambulances, only if the longer transportation is needed, which does not happen often. The amount of pavulon used by the ambulances in Łódź was suspicious.

Similar investigations in other cities showed the information about deaths was traded to the undertakers and the same problem also existed in other hospitals. The Polish Minister of Health prohibited the use of pavulon in all ambulance services (24.01.2002. wiadomości.tvp.pl). The 'Angel of Death' was arrested in February accused of taking bribes for the information about deaths. Then his punishment was changed for a bail. Finally, he has not paid the bail, but he was let free. Only

one out of the thirty people accused of the coups trade – an ambulance dispatcher – was still under arrest 3 months later (04.04.2002. wiadomosci.tvp.pl).

The case was evaluated by public as disgusting and immoral, a symptom of the “culture of death” and the sign of disrespect for human life or dignity. The doctors and squads of other ambulances complain that because of the above mentioned accusation, patients and their families do not trust them any more. They can hear such comments: “the angels of death have arrived” and they are treated and looked upon as murderers. It makes their underpaid work more difficult and it offends many honest health service workers. On the other hand, people are afraid to call the ambulance service as they do not know if they are going to be helped or killed.

19)

Wnuczka do dziadka:

– Dziadku, daj 20 zł albo wzywam pogotowie!

<http://forum.silownia.net/read.php>

A grand-daughter says to her grand-daddy:

Grandpa, give me 20 zł or I will call the ambulance!

The claim that “in the case of media disasters, it is the absence of humor that is socially deviant” (Ellis 2001) does not seem to be convincing. It is an oversimplification that does not take into consideration the social and cultural context of the media discourse and jokes appearance. The nature of many events is instantaneously global especially with the world wide use of satellites, world-wide web, emails and cellular phones. In such a situation no wonder that we know what happened on the 11th of September and that jokes which appeared afterwards are familiar to us. But, is the creation of sick disaster jokes really an obligatory reaction as the necessary sign of sympathy? I think that the situation is more complicated as there are different grades of engagement present in jokes. One may forward the English version only (it is not uncommon nowadays when so many Poles speak English). One may translate all or only certain types of jokes, and finally one may create a joke on the same subject in one’s own language. All these cases would mean something different and their detailed analysis would show many possibilities of various, culture-based interpretations.

Another problem is the recipients’ reaction to the sick jokes in different countries. A few years ago people reacted more strongly to the tasteless jokes being put on the Internet. There were cases the person who lunched the series was forced to apologize (“Życie Warszawy”, 20.01.1996). Nowadays, even if people are used to this type of jokes, still joking on the painful subjects is criticized, both in public and in private. Writing this paper I asked for help in translating some of the jokes into

English on a professional translators' newsgroup. I received the answer that it is embarrassing to deal with such sick texts.

The conclusion that could be drawn for now is following: Polish jokes are significantly influenced by American ones as one may observe in the World Trade Center series. Some of them are translations only. Nevertheless, I claim that even the decision to translate certain types of jokes and to omit others could be a sign of cultural difference in preferences. It is striking that the most popular are the "mildly" sick jokes. Another presented group – "anthrax jokes" are created on the basis of own tradition and with a respect to death as a specific taboo subject. The same trend of abstractedness is seen in the Polish "flood" and "corpse hunters" jokes. Therefore, cultural differences, having their source in national mentality, tradition and the system of values, are also visible.

As for the recipients, my opinion is that there is no point in blaming jokes for the reality. Jokes are cruel as the world is such. The values and problems they uncover say something not only about their creators, but also about the reality we live in. And it is not the sick jokes fault that there are not always only optimistic stories to be told.

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Niesmaczne dowcipy katastroficzne jako zjawisko kulturowe

Artykuł dotyczy specyfiki występowania niesmacznych dowcipów katastroficznych w kulturach polskiej i amerykańskiej. Przedstawiono w nim charakterystykę polskich dowcipów o powodzi, polskich i amerykańskich tekstów powstałych po terrorystycznym ataku na World Trade Centre oraz polskich dowcipów odnoszących się do afery tzw. „łowców skór” w łódzkim pogotowiu. Analizie poddano poszczególne grupy tekstów, ich źródła i kontekst socjokulturowy. Badanie komparatystyczne prowadzi do wniosku o kulturowo zróżnicowanym charakterze skryptów występujących w wymienionych grupach dowcipów. Ten brak symetrii między polskimi i amerykańskimi dowcipami ma swoje źródło w odmiennej mentalności, tradycji i wyznawanych systemach wartości, które jednakże ulegają unifikacji pod wpływem globalizacji, zmieniającej polskie preferencje do przedstawianego typu dowcipów.