

British and Polish Celebrity Jokes

DOROTA BRZOZOWSKA
(*Opole*)

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the connection between jokes, media and gossip in order to describe and compare their characteristic features in British and Polish cultural contexts. Celebrity jokes were chosen because they focus on people who appear frequently in media and, what is more, these jokes tend to be individualized and different for each society. They are mainly jokes of strong referential character – situational knowledge is necessary to appreciate them fully. Jokes could be perceived as a special type of gossip because of their simplistic, ridiculing and unmasking way of showing the characters (Thiele-Dohrmann 1980). They carry the unofficial information about certain facts or people, they spread wildly and are meant to entertain.

The world of media and visual culture is to a large extent the world of the new type of celebrities – mass celebrities – and a new type of gossip – mass media gossip. Our traditional art and literature have been for ages proof that it is part of human nature to seek heroes. It could be claimed it is a kind of instinct we have kept from tribal times when small groups of people used to have a leader who was well known to everyone, responsible for group safety and well-being (BBC 2001). This person was supposed to be trusted and followed. When people started to live in bigger communities, the personal relations with the leader were maintained in various ways: e.g., the face of ruler has been placed on coins, sculptures and portraits. The revolutions in print, photography, film, television and finally Internet have allowed us to be closer to the leaders' images once again. Rapid distribution of information makes it possible to have a "piece of a hero" easily and cheaply available. That made the number of celebrities grow rapidly. New stars glitter usually only a while before they are forgotten and the new ones are created. Quantity does influence quality, so the status of the leader has changed dramatically from someone being special, unique and exceptional – having wis-

dom, talents or power – to someone more ordinary, one of ‘us’. In extreme cases, it is someone who just agrees to be watched all day long, as in different ‘reality show’ programs.

Celebrities have a special position not only in the media but in jokes as well, but not all events ‘deserve’ to have their moment of fame:

– Why didn’t the capsized Haitian boat that drowned 300 people make big news for more than a day?

– It was discovered that none of them on board was a princess. OCMark111@aol.com

Jokes are told only about the most loved or most hated ones – the ones who could evoke emotions. Sometimes there is only a very thin line between those two extreme feelings. We can observe it especially in British jokes. The British are said to be emotionally very cold, but if we look at the type of jokes they create something quite opposite could be seen. The phenomenon is possible because those who like black humor are said to be people with an ability to separate the fiction of jokes from the reality to which it refers (Herzog, Bush 1994).

British society differs from Polish society in many ways. One of them is having the royalty, a feature of national life that has been absent from Poland for several centuries. The royal family is an important part of British identity and their members are in a natural position of media attention. Their images are the focus of public interest and are sources for developing curiosity and a means of peeping into someone’s life. The members of the royal family are perfect characters for the everyday chapters of newspapers’ “soap opera”.

A good example of both features – a royal subject and black humor – are sick disaster jokes about Diana, Princess of Wales. Her popularity was proved by the number of jokes created after her death. She was loved by the nation, admired and talked about constantly in the media. After her death, thousands of jokes appeared. Although she was considered almost a saint during her life, the jokes proved to be tasteless and cruel. They pointed out many of the painful details from her biography, covering subjects as her eating disorders, her husband’s unfaithfulness, her own lovers, the divorce, and bad relations with other royal family members. Even previously admired features, such as her good taste in clothes and her charity work, were ridiculed mercilessly:

– How did The Royal Family stop the paparazzi from visiting Diana’s grave?

– By placing Land mines around it. OCMark111@aol.com

As paparazzi were blamed for the accident, the press withdrew from chasing Diana’s sons – for which they were thanked by William, the heir to the throne. Time has passed, and there was not much to add about Diana after months of pu-

blishing books, tributes, and photos showing her 'true' or 'unknown' story. It started to be clear that:

Princess Diana was once a kindergarten teacher.
Now she's history. OCMark111@aol.com

Soon it seemed that a proper person to be talked about is lacking at the court, as Charles and Camilla's affair had its moment before Diana's death, and that subject is not often discussed, once again, for the sake of the young sons. The public 'appetite' for royal gossip hasn't ceased. Therefore new celebrities have to appear.

David and Victoria Beckham have recently gained the dubious honor of fame and media attention. They don't belong to the Royal family but are perceived like they almost would. He is a footballer and the captain of Manchester United team, and she is a singer – one of Spice Girls group. The couple has a penthouse apartment near Manchester and a mansion at Sawbridgeworth, Herts – called "Beckingham Palace". They are certainly rich and famous. Victoria is called 'Posh' and has posed for the camera wearing a crown on her head – which hasn't been seen as being in very good taste.

In English society, being rich is not enough to deserve public favor. If you want to be treated as a member of the upper class, you have to behave like one. To do so, you have to know how to spend your money. The Beckhams seem to spend their fortune in a not very distinctive way. Buying leather beds, expensive jewelry or tons of presents for the child is seen as ridiculous - and it is exactly what they do to their son, Brooklin, on birthday or Christmas occasions, making people roar with laughter.

Not only is their life commented on in daily newspapers, but also hundreds of jokes circulate. They show David as being extremely stupid and dependent on his wife – phoning her even when he has to choose something from the menu only:

David Beckham: "Victoria, why is this bacon cold?"

Posh: "Because it is ham David!" www.euphoria.co.uk/celebrity/jokebeck.htm

Many jokes relate to their sexual life, and in most the aggression is once again pointed more strongly towards David:

- Why does Posh Spice always go on top when she and Beckham are having sex?
- Beckam can only fuck up. www.euphoria.co.uk/celebrity/jokebeck.htm
- David Beckham walks into the pub. The barman says "Pint Dave?"
Beckham replies "No, just a half then I am off". www.euphoria.co.uk/celebrity/jokebeck.htm

Football fans can't forgive David for being ordered off in the World Cup finals in 1998. England lost the match, and afterwards he became the "victim of probably the most sustained campaign of vilification ever witnessed in English football". The articles "piled up cheap points about everything from Beckham's hairstyle to the tattoo of his son's name, there was an unavoidable sense that we were meant to regard the rotten treatment the lad has received as no more than he deserves". Effigies of Beckham were hanged and burned, and he was hounded with a cruel intensity that would have broken other players. People purporting to be England supporters showered on him taunts like "your wife is a whore", "we hope your kid dies of cancer" and "we're going to kill your baby" ("The Sunday Times" 22.06.2000).

Several years later, even when he proved his football skills many times, after a very successful match he would hear the comments on his haircut from someone in managerial position: "his new look is grotesque", "he looks more like a convict or an American wrestler". The new image was blamed on his wife – mentioning her in a rather offending manner: "maybe it was that misuse of his, the one who tries to sing" ("The Mirror" 26. 05. 2001).

The Polish type of personal joke is slightly different. For many years during communism, politics was the major interest– so the life of politicians was one of the popular subjects. Those who governed the country were most often treated in jokes like the state representatives – seen in the context of political situation. Their private lives were rarely discussed. After the fall of communism, Lech Wałęsa became the last of the political celebrities evoking large numbers of jokes. Afterwards, the American series started to rule, so Poles were telling more jokes about blondes, Bill Gates or Bill Clinton than about their own president or any other celebrity.

Recently Poland has had its own big celebrity joke boom after several years of decline in Polish humor as 'małyszomania' started.

Adam Małysz is a young ski jumper who won the annual Four Hill Tour, 5 competitions of World Cup, and was second in the World Championship in 2001. Poles are very proud of him, television kept showing his successes, the press was writing about him and immediately a lot of jokes appeared:

A stork is flying near Adam and says:

- Hey, we have been flying together for two hours and you haven't introduced yourself yet. "Dobry Humor", *Dowcipy o Małyszu*, 4/2001

- What is the difference between Małysz and a glider?

- The glider lands faster. www.skrypty98.hg.pl/kawaly.htm

After taking part in adverts, Adam Małysz's wife also became celebrity, although still only as a source of information about her husband. 'Women press' printed an interviews with her, asking about their home routines and his favorite food.

- Why did Małysz take his wife to the ski-jump immediately after the wedding?
- He had to carry her over the threshold. www.skrvpty98.hg.pl/kawalyv.htm
- The wife, Iza, asks Małysz:
- Adam, darling, jump to the shop for butter.
- I can't - it is too close. "Dobry Humor", *Dowcipy o Małyszu*, 4/2001

The stories of Beckham's and Małysz's sports careers are parallel. Both had a not very impressive past, but now they are the champions in their disciplines. It is, however, interesting to observe that Poles concentrate on present successes while British are not so eager to forget their old disappointments. Although the jokes about Beckhams are very rude, vulgar and aggressive with their use of SEX and STUPIDITY scripts (Raskin 1985), the jokes about Małysz are much in favor of their hero. They underscore his ability to jump very far - and the skill is perceived as his only 'weak' point. The scripts do not mention his sex life or physical appearance. They are by no means aggressive. There is no sender's jealousy in them - quite the contrary. There is evident pride in present achievements. Their main aim is to emphasize the hero's virtue, making a best-ever sportsman out of him.

Not only jokes but also Polish and English newspapers are culturally different. The Polish press is not used to presenting the same titles day by day and describing the same people's daily stories continuously. "*Their English voracious appetite for printed news, gossip and scandal is unequalled (...) Nobody really understands why*" (Miall 1993: 42). Maybe it is connected with the fact that all kinds of gossip was told by members of the upper class, this relatively small social stratum that needed entertainment and was constantly looking for new and exciting subjects (Thiele - Dohrmann 1980: 42). Nowadays newspapers with the obligatory social column have their roots in England. The British press, apparently without any scruples, disseminates gossip of all kinds to a broad range of readers. Television is not better - e.g., the gossip about a famous actress's (Nicole Kidman's) new boyfriend was told on the Channel 5 national news, alongside reports on the foot and mouth disease crisis and the debate on the current political elections campaign.

There are several British celebrity magazines, and one of the editors says this: "That the editor of a celebrity title has been made the editor of a national newspaper shows how important and all-consuming the entertainment world is

now. In a year's time, I think the number of celebrity magazines out there will have doubled". He adds: "Our readers are intelligent people who (...) enjoy indulging in reading a little gossip, the same way we all do" ("Evening Standard" 30.05.2001).

The British assume they have the right to know what others are up to, and the thought that people should not be ashamed of what they are doing could be traced back to the Puritan tradition. The reluctance to cover windows could be a symbol of it. Even today, when we walk through the streets of British cities we can easily observe what is going on inside the old Victorian houses. In Poland, windows without laces are perceived as shameless – especially in small communities where gossip is present and very popular but officially denied as improper. This situation is an example of typical 'sane morality', like the saying that we should keep dirty things to ourselves. "It is why we have four walls and the ceiling – to wash own dirt at home, make no one know about it. Dragging them around the world is neither moral nor honest" (Zapolska 1972: 36). In Britain, quite the opposite seems to be true – if someone is moral, he or she shouldn't be ashamed - and even literally a lot of people still hang their laundry in common rooms outside their own homes, seeing nothing improper in it.

In Poland, gossip is perceived as a female domain – which in a patriarchal society means that it has a lesser value – so if men gossip they would not like to admit it. If the creation of jokes has mainly male characters, it is not surprising that Polish jokes are not that strongly gossiping type. They are usually more general – laughing at some Kowalski or Fafara - the character without a real face – someone who could be everyone or no one, but they very rarely point the finger into real name and tell awful stories about that person.

One could wonder if this type of personal joke has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon tradition that encouraged men to talk about details from other people's lives. The British always had special institutions to support that custom - what else have the men-only clubs been for? Talkativeness was perceived as something good and belonging to male sphere in English culture. It is very strange to observe that even today there are usually no female speakers on Hyde Park Corner. There used to be no women in pubs - the perfect place for male gossiping – as well. Taking these reasons into account, we shouldn't be surprised that news about life of known people appears on the front pages of British newspapers so often.

In Polish newspapers celebrities' lives are discussed only in so-called 'women's magazines'. It is shameful for a man to admit that he reads it. There is usually no place for the story of an individual hero in the 'real' bloody news. The

new type of programs – ‘reality shows’- have many male and female viewers. Will there be a time when the report from ‘Big Brother’s’ house is treated as the most important news of the day? Will the new ‘reality’ heroes’ fame be strong enough to produce celebrity jokes? How would the relations between media and jokes evolve? The answer should be known very soon.

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Brytyjskie i polskie dowcipy o znanych osobach

Celem artykułu jest porównawcza analiza brytyjskich i polskich dowcipów o popularnych w mediach osobach, które są obiektem licznych dowcipów. Można te dowcipy traktować jako rodzaj plotki, gdyż rozpowszechniają nie zawsze sprawdzone informacje.

Da się zauważyć znaczne różnice w tonie dowcipów brytyjskich i polskich. Wśród dowcipów brytyjskich przeważają dowcipy agresywne, obraźliwe i wulgarne (por. dowcipy o D. Beckhamie), natomiast dowcipy polskie są znacznie łagodniejsze, swoje “ofiary” traktują z życzliwością (np. dowcipy o A. Małyszu kreują go na bohatera, którego jedyną “wadą” jest umiejętność wykonywania dalekich skoków).

Przyczyn tej różnicy autorka doszukuje się w odmiennych narodowych mentalnościach. To one odpowiadają za różny charakter mediów i za sposób plotkowania.