

ON DEFINING BRITISH AND AMERICAN NATIONAL
IDENTITY THROUGH HUMOR

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Abstract

This article dwells on diverse expressions of humor in British and American cultures. It highlights humor as an important means of interaction between different social groups and reveals their national peculiarities, which are vividly reflected in various expressions of humor.

Over time, both nations have developed their own unique form of humor based on their national identity and historical experience. Humor is a vital means that serves to express positive or negative feelings through language. A humorous view of life is very important. Britain and the USA are two separate cultures with their own characteristics, histories, and mentalities. Both nations use diverse methods of expressing humor.

The purpose of the study is to show the variety of English and American humor. The material for research comprises different examples of American and English jokes on various topics. The relevance of this study is determined by the growing impact of humor as a means of communication and socialization that promotes mutual understanding, tolerance, and hence respect among members of society and different nations. The novelty of the article is the material studied in the paper. In the research, we have employed the methods of data comparison and analysis.

Keywords: British/American humor, national identity, cultural peculiarities, national self-awareness, historical factors, level of education, irony/sarcasm.

Introduction

There is usually a variety of means to determine national identity. In some countries, it's identified by the place of birth, regardless of skin color, ideology, quality of character, ethnic characteristics. In other countries, national identity is determined by knowledge of the language and history of the country. In controversial cases, DNA identifies national identity. In practice, as a rule, the combination of both social and biological tests are used, with the help of which national identity is determined.

However, there might be quite a different method of defining national identity using such a quality of national character as humor. It's general truth that each nation has its own type of national humor. People talk about French, Russian, German, American, Japanese, English and other options

for understanding and appreciating humor, which is reflected in literature, morality, behavior, art and in the general relation to the world.

Humor is a phenomenon that is influenced by culture. A nation's wit is also closely linked to the historical development of the country. Therefore, humor is something, which is not always appreciated and correctly perceived in another country. What somebody from one area may find hilarious may not be amusing at all to somebody from another location. Whether someone gets a joke is determined by their interpretation filtered by the cultural context.

People of all ages and cultures respond to humor. Most people are able to experience humor and be amused, smile or laugh at something funny, and thus are considered to have a *sense of humor*.

A person lacking a sense of humor would likely find the behavior of a joker inexplicable, strange, or even irrational. Though any sense of humor is determined by personal taste, the extent to which a person finds something humorous, depends on a host of factors, including geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, intelligence and cultural context.

As we stated above humor is strongly based on the national character of the country and its historical development. What about when both countries speak the same mother tongue? Does that mean that they share the same sense of humor, or can differences still occur?

In this article we are going to study British and American humor based on their national and historical peculiarities.

What are the national traits of Americans and the British?

A national character is a generalized concept with some stereotypes. A national character has real grounds in history and culture. It includes customs, traditions, values, and patterns of behavior of a nation as well as an image of this nation from the point of view of foreigners.

As for the American national character, it was formed by the rich history of the USA. The first settlers of this country were colonizers who came from a different civilization, from another world to build a New World. Americans created their national identity in hard fighting and difficulties; the War of Independence, the Civil War between the North and the South. They passed a tortuous and long way to reach the status of the most powerful country in the world with an enormous global economic influence and became a center of the global mass culture realizing the American Dream of prosperity. All these factors have greatly contributed to molding the national identity of Americans. Americans are brave, active, and ambitious: they always do, always try until they win. Their ideal is a "self-made person" who succeeds on his own, makes a fortune, and becomes powerful. The main value that Americans have sought is individual freedom. Americans are very sociable, hardworking and optimistic. Spontaneity is at the heart of their national character. They are carriers of democratic values; they are great patriots respecting their national past and loving their national holidays [Zenon, 57].

As for the British, they are generally polite. But this way of behavior is probably a mask for all kind of other feelings. They may be polite partly because they are afraid of drama and of confrontation.

The British national character is a unique combination of different influences, historical factors resulting in a people who are calm and sensible, yet also very emotional. British national character is a mix of formality and eccentricity, with a strong emphasis on individual freedom within traditional boundaries, deep thoughts, and philosophy.

British people are obliged by society stereotyping to be polite. They accumulate negative emotions and feelings and do not, as a rule, express their real feelings spontaneously, which is the case with Americans.

Some people believe that the British are cold, insensitive, phlegmatic people. The British are slow moving, tend to avoid sharp corners, and have an inherent desire to be away from prying eyes, which gives rise to a cult of privacy.

One reason for the famous English restraint, for the desire to hide emotions is a consequence of strict upbringing. The British value discipline very highly and are regarded as the most well-mannered and polite in the world. The British politely respect you and respect their and your personal space, do not poke their nose into your affairs, do not ask questions, even just finding out a person's name without a good reason is indecently rude.

Since the British have a specific politeness, it is often confused with coldness. In fact, violent temperament and ardent passions are disguised by coldness and superiority. Sometimes it is enough to watch an English crowd at a national holiday or at a football match to feel how the national temperament is breaking from the reins of self-control [Dmitriev, 91].

In spite of all diversity of American and British cultures and their national identity American literature and folklore, have Anglo-Saxon roots. All English and American literature from the origins to the present day are full of humor. Of course, literary and everyday humor are not the same, but there is a certain connection between them. It is developed as the continuation of British humor however; there are some significant differences in using and introducing humor of these two nationalities. Both are mainly based on the traditions, ways of behavior and communication that define and complete their national identity [Rourk, 122].

Humor is a very significant characteristic feature of the English national identity, and an extremely necessary element of national self-awareness. The British are proud of their humor and, not without reason, consider it their national wealth. They are sensitive to its assessment by foreigners.

Both nations have developed their unique style of humor based on their national identity and history. Here are some examples of most popular types of British and American humor. Humor is a demonstration of nonsense or absurdity of objects, actions or situations, made with the intention of causing a smile. Usually it is produced defiantly and bloated.

Both nations use a few different methods for different genres of their humor. They use irony, sarcasm, dry humor, satirical humor, wit, self-depreciation, green humor/white humor, hacker humor, puns and, so on. Let us prove this through the following examples taken from the internet sources, social websites.

1. Irony. These are jokes when the result in a story turns out in a way that no one expected, and which seems contradictory.

- *Yesterday our **policeman was robbed.***

The point is that the policeman fights against thefts and must prevent them, but he himself became a victim.

2. Sarcasm. This is a kind of highest degree of irony when it is used to mock, ridicule something or someone.

- *I hate explaining simple things to people and answering millions of questions a day.*

- *Oh, Linda, you will be **a great mother.***

In fact, we understand that Linda will have a difficult time as a mother.

3 Humor based on puns. These are very funny jokes that a person says with a serious face. He knows that everyone will laugh, but he deliberately puts on a straight face to make everything even more comical.

- *Why is it so wet in England?*
- *Because many kings and queens have **reigned** there.*

Thus, the words *reign* and *rain* sound the same, so this replacement of meaning creates an absurd situation and makes people laugh. British people make abundant use of puns which helps them to disguise their emotions and attitudes. A good pun will definitely attract attention and cause generous laughter from listeners.

- ***Why did the old man fall into a well?***
- *He couldn't see that **well**.*
- *What is the name of a person without a left arm and a leg?*
- ***All right.***
- *Where do the geologists go for entertainment?*
- *To **rock** concerts.*
- ***I'm thinking about taking up meditation.***
- *I figure it's better than **sitting around and doing nothing.***
- *Good heavens! What's this?*
- ***It's bean soup.***
- *I don't care what **it's been**. I want to know what it is now.*

This is a pun on the expressions “It is bean soup” and “It has been soup”, which are pronounced the same way.

4. Dry humor is about removing emotions and letting the joke do the talking. Relying on the lack of emotions and facial expressions makes the situation even much funnier.

- ***I told my wife she was drawing her eyebrows too high.***
She looked surprised.
- ***How do you get a squirrel to like you?***
*Act like a **nut**.*

5. Wit. These are small witticisms, comments that a joker quickly inserts into some conversation. It is important that these inserts are not only funny but also accurate.

- *I love that he fully provides me with money, clothes, and everything. But sometimes it's uncomfortable, that he gives money for useless things.*
- *Don't worry; he is just a **fan of monarchy.***

This joke can be interpreted like this: the British often criticize the royal family for the fact that their maintenance requires large sums of money, which are taken from citizens' taxes. Therefore, we can often hear sharp jokes from the British about their authorities and their power.

6. Self-depreciation - self-irony. The British love to mock their national characteristics, such as excessive punctuality, scrupulousness, and slowness.

- *I'd like you to visit Britain: it's a beautiful and great place to eat questionable food.*
- *I am so bad at cooking, I could burn water.*
- *I couldn't run a bath, let alone this race. I make snails look speedy.*

7. Hacker humor. Hacker humor is borrowed from computer culture and refers to the type of humor that comes from those experts who master the vocabulary of programming. These are usually elaborate parodies involving documents, code, programming languages and files, and all sorts of aspects of the cyber world.

- *My email password has been hacked.*
- *That's the third time I've had to rename **the cat**.*

- *My bank account was hacked.*
- *The hacker sent me an email that he has hacked into my computer.*
- *I said "prove it" and he sent me the username and password of my email, bank and social media accounts.*
- *I replied "Thank you that was the easiest Forgot Password process I have ever come across".*

8. Green humor, White Humor This type of humor does not contain irony or sarcasm. It is the humor of clowns, mimes, silent movies. It is somewhat childish and naive. For this reason, it is considered universal, suitable for the understanding of anyone.

- *When do you start on **red** and stop on **green**?*
- *When you are eating **a watermelon!***
- *Solar radiation has turned the American flags on the moon pure white...*
- *So now it looks like France landed there.*

So the British love to make fun of everything - politics, government, relatives, weather, national cuisine, neighbors, and especially the royal family. However, it is worth noting that English humor is not an evil mockery, but only a way to observe the strange habits and characteristics that everyone has.

Americans like the British, joke on different spheres of life: politics, finance, war, religion, education. Here are some examples.

- How do you offend an American?*
- Don't worry, they'll find something to be offended about.*
- An American tourist in Australia got hit by a car.*
- He woke up in a hospital with a doctor standing over him.*
- He asked the doctor, "Did I come here **to die**?"*
- The doctor replied, "Nah, mate, you came here **yesterday**."*

Here is another American joke on political life.

*The American Government is just like a car. If you want it to go forward, you put it in "**D**" and if you want it to go backwards, you put it in "**R**".*

This implies the two parties the Democrats and the Republicans. In the political system of the United States, **Democrats** are largely associated with liberalism - a political philosophy based on belief in progress - while **Republicans** are associated with conservatism - a political philosophy based on tradition and social stability.

- How do you get Americans to join a World War?*
- Tell them it is nearly finished.*
- A German, an American, and a Russian discuss their traveling habits.*
- The German says: "We have very well developed railways, and when going to a neighboring country we take the train."*
- The American then goes: "Well, my country is very large, and traveling on a train is not efficient. When we are traveling to a neighboring county we fly on a plane".*
- The Russian thinks for a second and responds: "When we go to a neighboring country, we ride in a tank."*

These were just a few examples of different categories of British and American humor and humor often overlaps between these categories.

After studying the examples, we can state that there are some major differences in the ways both nations express their wit based on their national identity and history. An open, smart American humor is a means of relaxation and a possibility to avoid and overcome stressful situations. American humor is often straightforward and obvious like Americans themselves. Americans do not make regular use of irony whereas the British use it on a daily basis. Irony is the foundation of British humor. British humor is more subtle, usually with a dark and sarcastic intent with a hidden meaning. This obviously stems from the fact that the British culture is more reserved than the American culture. Humor is important both for the British and for Americans. In order to fit in their society one should understand their humor.

Conclusion

To sum up we should note that British humor regularly uses irony, while American humor does not. British humor is very subtle while American humor is very slapstick. British humor tends to hide a lot of sarcasm and strong emotions. American humor is more straightforward and obvious.

To appreciate humor you need to understand the cultural context and national peculiarities of the country. In addition to this, you must have a good command of the language. The special techniques and ways of expressing humor make the style of humor unique and inimitable. In the course of time the mentality and understanding of comic effect change and its forms and means, alter as well.

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