GISELINDE KUIPERS

Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries

Humor is strongly related to group boundaries. Jokes and other humorous utterances often draw on implicit references and inside knowledge; they tend to refer to
sensitive topics which may offend people; and they ideally incite laughter, one of
the strongest markers of social solidarity and emotional attunement. Hence, a
shared sense of humor is generally a *sine qua non* for sustained relationships. Inversely, people who do not share one's humor are often shunned (Kuipers 2006).
Laughing together, therefore, is a sign of belonging: those who join in the laughter,
are part of the group; those who don't join expose themselves as outsiders.

   This essay explores the mechanisms through which humor is related to social
boundaries: how does humor differ between groups? What are the consequences
of such differences? How do humor styles emerge and change, and what happens
when different humor styles »meet«? Theoretically, the essay draws on insights from
cultural sociology (Bourdieu 1979; Elias 1939; Lamont 1992; Lamont/Thevenot
2000; Lahire 2004; Molnar/Lamont 2002), the sociology of emotions (Collins
2005; Goffman 1959)., as well as humor scholarship (Davies 2002; Oring
2003; Raskin 2008). The discussion will be organized around empirical examples
both from my own sociological research on humor in various European countries
and the US, and from examples of humor in literature and popular culture. The
essay will discuss the following mechanisms: Humor draws on implicit and culture-or group-specific knowledge. Moreover, it requires considerable linguistic aptitude. In other words: humor needs to be decoded. Humor touches on sensitive
topics and taboo issues, which obviously differ strongly between groups. Hence,
what is funny to some is offensive to others. Humor requires, and leads to specific
emotional responses (laughter, mirth) that are strongly connected with emotional
closeness, solidarity and trust. Hence, humor requires specific social bonds to flourish. On the other hand, humor may also generate such social bonds, if used wisely.

Humor has generic conventions and markers that may differ between groups. As a result, people may not recognize attempts at humor as such, or they may object to a specific form. Also, a specific form may require specific skills (e. g. appreciating Shakespearean comedies requires considerable background and training, which is not related to humor appreciation as such but still may be an impediment. Alternatively, educated Europeans often distrust the joke form to the extent that they will not be open to it even though they might rather like the content of the joke). Finally, and most importantly: Different groups often have different notions of what good and bad humor is. In other words: they have different stylistic criteria and standards, and different ideas of what humor is, or should »do«. This may lead to different evaluations of the same humorous utterances and genres. Such stylistic factors are hardest to grasp, but probably account for most of the difference in appreciation of humor, especially within one culture or society (Kuipers 2006). These five mechanisms by and large account for the emergence of »humor styles«. Such humor styles are often related to social boundaries, and they often demarcate what sociologists refer to as »symbolic boundaries«: social boundaries that become salient, meaningful, and often imbued with status differences (Molnar/Lamont 2002). Such stylistic differences are expressed in the use of humor in everyday life, but also in standardized and mediated forms of humor – such as literary humor. Literary humor reflects, but also contributes to, the humor style of a specific place, time, and group. Moreover, innovation in literary humor, as well as other forms of mediated humor, often implies adaptation or even transgression of the current humor styles.

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