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COMMUNICATING ONLINE IN AN ETHICAL WAY

Lilia Duskaeva (ed.): *The Ethics of Humour in Online Slavic Media Communication*. Routledge. London and New York 2022, 166 pages.

Ethical communication is a vital issue related to problems discussed in religious, theological, philosophical, sociological, psychological, and linguistic studies. The topic of an ethical face of humour also comes back in humour studies, usually more intensively after calamities, disasters or spectacular acts of aggression (e.g. as it was in the case of Charlie Hebdo, Kuipers 2011). The interesting aspect of the discussed publication is the connection between ethics and humour investigated in the specific online Slavic media context. The geographic area explored in the book may be of great interest to the readers especially when we witness the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the media coverage of the war. Some humorous material is also present in this conflict as a part of the information war. The use and presence of humour in the tragic situation is a typical feature (cf. Sover 2021) but its appropriateness raises ethical questions. The questions raised in this publication, prepared just before the war, are even more relevant now as the current situation changes the readers' perspective. It is interesting to note that one of the frequently quoted words concerning laughter and moral values are those by the most famous Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky: "[…] it seems to me that a man may be known by his laugh alone. If the laugh of a man you are acquainted with inspires you with sympathy, be assured that he is an honest [in Polish translation *good*] man" (Dostoevsky 1914, p. 45). The words came from his lesser-known work, the autobiography titled "The House of the Dead or Prison Life in Siberia". The author had been sentenced to death for his liberal political views, at the last moment commuted to imprisonment in Siberia.

The book "The Ethics of Humour in Online Slavic Media Communication" has been edited by Lilia Duskaeva, Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at St. Petersburg State University, a person whose heart is open to cooperation and her career is strictly connected with the subject. She is the Head of the Department of Media Linguistics, Head of the Media Linguistic Commission of the International Committee of Slavists, editor-in-chief of the *Media Linguistics* journal and guest editor of the Humor in the Media issue for *The European Journal of Humour Research* (2021). To create this volume, she had invited other Slavic researchers from Russia (Saint Petersburg and Voronezh State Universities), Belarus

(Yanka Kupala State University of Hrodna), Lithuania (Vilnius University), Slovakia (Comenius University in Bratislava), and Poland (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and University of Wrocław) giving the subject a broad international perspective. The authors try to answer the following questions: "What ethical meanings are carried by the media messages? When does laughter contain elements of evil? When is laughter is opposed to evil? What ethical evaluations of humour are expressed in users' comments, and what verbal means do they use?" (p. xii). As the first and fourth questions seem answerable, the questions suggesting that laugher may contain evil or can be opposite to it are rather mental shortcuts contrasting phenomena from different spheres, which makes them quite difficult to answer.

The book consists of ten chapters and conclusions. The first two constitute an introduction, and the other ones are split into two parts – four chapters each. The chapters in both parts are structured in a similar way – they consist of a theoretical outline and two different case studies analysed in a schematic way: a context of the story is given, the case analysed, and the values discussed – the evaluation framework is made "by three components: the object of evaluation, its ethical and comic assessment by the speaker, and the criterion of evaluation" (p. 28). That makes the structure of the publication clear and neat.

In the well-developed introductory part, the editor clearly presents the theoretical framework used for the analysis of the ethics of humour in mass media discourse. She discusses ethical issues of humour in philosophy – briefly recalling the principal views of the well-known authors from the antiquity till modernity and pointing out that humour itself is an object of positive or negative ethical evaluation (p. 8). She explains the three stages of proposed media discourse analysis that include the description of: 1. proto-situation, 2. the humorous action 3. approving or critical comments, forming the metatext of the humorous situation (p. 9).

The theoretical part is supplemented by the chapter on multimodality of Internet-mediated communication behaviour, written by Danuta Kępa-Figura. It focuses on the multimodality as a research category in exploring media messages, giving the stage-of-research report based on works published originally in English, German, Polish and Russian. The outline of the history of multimodality research is accompanied by the achievements of humour researchers in this area. Finally, the research assumptions for studies on the multimodality of media communication are presented with the proposed model for online text introspective analysis – conducted further in the particular chapters. Both chapters are of a high methodological value, as they show in a detailed way the theoretical background and the construction of tools used consequently in the volume, and ready to be re-used on the same or different language material.

In the first analytical chapter "Humour as Mockery", Lilia Duskaeva and Ksenia Shilikhina discuss scandalous discourse, *scandal* meaning "a public condemnation of an immoral action expressed by a large number of participants of media discourse in an extremely expressive manner" (p. 28) with the examples of the publication by the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* of the cartoons after the terrorist attack on a Russian plane (2015), and the mass media comments doubting the

poisoning of Alexey Navalny (2020). In the first case, "the majority of Russian users were united by anger", and the Russian Foreign Ministry asked: "Is anyone still Charlie?" (p. 30). In the second case, the authors analyse humorous comments treating them as a form of trolling, showing that humour was used to demonstrate people's disbelief in Russian authorities' involvement in the poisoning of the opposition leader with Novichok. Both cases show that the critique from abroad, serious or humorous, "triggered a feeling of patriotism that is inherent in the Russians" (p. 38). The Russian media talking with one voice seem quite a menacing power but maybe this is also a reflection of the censored reality.

In the next chapter, "Humour in Prank Telephone Conversations" by Lilia Duskaeva and Ekaterina Shcheglova, the pranksters Vovan and Lexus list their major ethical prohibitions, stating among others "not to mock religion […], not to violate the order and balance of the state system (hence the reluctance to play jokes on Russian political leaders)" (p. 43). Foreign politicians who criticize Russia are their targets. Maxine Waters, a congresswoman from the United States, is the victim in both the discussed cases. It is pointed out that the eighty-year-old is the "oldest US politician" (p. 44), who "did not suspect deception" (p. 45). Names from the Korney Chukovsky's fairy tale about Dr. Aibolit from Limpopo (first case), and the Soviet children's song about the fictional character Chunga-Changa (second case) were used to mislead Waters into believing that her interlocutors talk about real places. The pranks were perceived as successful and well deserved: "The pranks functioned as a means of communicative defence against the hostile attitude to Russia from the outer world" (p. 56). The approval of pranksters, praised for their patriotism (p. 48), "is accompanied by verbal abuse of the victim" (p. 50). "Approval is expressed by the insults about the victim" (p. 56). Although, especially in the second case, commentators have opposing views on the ethical side of the pranks, most comments themselves are sexist, racist and ageist, which raises questions if they can be called ethical.

The next chapters (5 to 9) deal with different culture-specific terms related to humour: Russian *izdevka* (gibe) and *poshlost'*, Polish *kpina* (mockery) and *wyszydzanie* (derision), Belarusian *zdzek*, and Slovak *uštipačnost'*.

The chapter about humour as *izdevka,* by Lilia Duskaeva and Liubov Ivanova, defines it as 'malicious mockery, caustic and malicious ridicule, cruel laughter and provocative language play'. Both cases that show the use of *izdevka* deal with Telegram channel users. The first proto-situation concerns the messages about the Russian Minister of Industry and Trade, Denis Manturov and his statement about being delighted at the fall of his domestic currency (p. 61), and the second presents mocking comments about the new requirements for the Oscars. The inclusion of ethnic minorities, women, LGBT community and people with disabilities in film industry has been ridiculed. What is interesting, the requirements reminded the Russians about the Soviet quota system, which is quite strange, as the Soviet regime ruthlessly suppressed all kinds of minority groups. What is more, the authors claim that "The love of justice is a feature of the Russian culture" (p. 72). In this chapter, apart from *izdevka,* some other culturally unique words are discussed, e.g. "the lack of words

in other languages for the adequate translation of the Russian word *obida*: the English *offence* is more consistent with Russian *osorblenie*", while *obida* is somehow connected with *injustice* (p. 62). The detailed analysis once again shows that the interpretations and evaluations of verbal acts are strongly embedded in linguistic, social and political contexts.

The chapter "Humour as Evaluation of *Poshlost'* and Cynicism in the Speech of Others" by Viktoria Vasileva deals with another "one of the most Russian of Russian words" (p. 76) – *poshlost'* – transliterated according to the tradition established by Vladimir Nabokov, and called one of the "key words" of the Russian culture by Wierzbicka (1997). It is understood as some kind of cynicism, connected with banality, platitude, kitsch, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, and indecency. The author rightly refers to Wierzbicka's analysis, and she also gives some examples of the key word quoting novelists and lexical sources – it is a pity the other authors in the collection do not follow this trail. Vasileva claims that the presence of humour, ridicule and the cynical demonstration of detachment are obligatory features of the contemporary Russian mass media (p. 76). She demonstrates it with the examples of heated reactions to the following comment by the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation Vladimir Medinsky: "for an adult to read comics is to admit that "I'm a moron, I read comics". One can probably collect them, that's cool, but not read them" (p. 80). His words were called – "ringing *poshlost'*", started a long debate and inspired a series of mems. (Sadly, the widely quoted comment of the Polish Minister of Culture on his reading of the books of the Polish Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk – "I have tried but never managed to finish one" – come to mind…).[1] The second case study in this chapter deals with the slogan "Hero City of Dismemberment", parodying the Soviet slogan "Hero City of Leningrad", which was coined after several dismembered corpses had been found in St. Petersburg, analysing sick jokes and the critical comments about them that followed. The chapter gives a good insight into attitudes towards official statements and black humour triggered by domestic affairs.

The part of the book entitled "Ethics of Online Humour in Slavic-Language Computer-Mediated Verbal Interaction" opens with the chapter "Humour as a Provocation of *Kpina* (Mockery) and *Wyszydzanie* (Derision) in the Polish Political Segment of Twitter" by Bogumił Gasek. It discusses the two concepts based on the examples of posts and comments published by the followers of two political influencers, Rafał Ziemkiewicz and Roman Giertych, who represent opposing points of view and two main contradictory narratives of contemporary Polish politics. The Polish terms used in the title: *kpina* and *wyszydzanie* are defined with their English translations only, and their culture-specific use is exemplified solely by the case studies' material. The first case study deals with the tweets published in the context of an accident at the Czajka sewage treatment plant in Warsaw, and the second with the comments associated with mass protests which broke out after

1 https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,25284068,minister-kultury-odpowiada-na-pytanie-ktore-ksiazki-tokarczuk.html; 8.10.2019.

the Polish Supreme Court's ruling on the eugenic abortion (both from the year 2020). The chapter gives a good insight into Polish political scene. The analysed material shows the abundance of personal attacks used in the Twitter discussions. Provocateurs of mockery and derision often became the victims of it, when the participants in the exchanges replicated and reinforced the provocation (p. 109).

In the chapter "Humour as *Zdzek* in the Verbal Behaviour of the Participants of the Belarusian-Language Online Community", *T*amara Pivavarchyk and Ina Minchuk analyse another Slavic – this time Belarusian – linguistic and culture-specific concept of *zdzek*. They deal with a special subcode used by the online community there – a parody of the mixed Belarusian-Russian speech called LOL-trasyanka. *Zdzek* is defined as 'evil, humiliating mockery, as well as humiliating act or behaviour in relation to someone, something' (p. 112). The authors quote the Belarusian proverb: "If they did not laugh and rejoice, they would have hanged themselves long ago" (p. 113), and explain that the complicated situation in the country caused "ressentiment – a long term mental attitude that arises as a result of a systematic prohibition on the expression of certain mental movements and affects" (p. 113). There have been "socio-political reasons for Belarusians to perceive negative situations as acute *zdzek*" (p. 112). Their first case study example includes the photo report ridiculing the appearance of representatives of public administration (with "beehive"-like hairstyles). The commenting *zdzek* is a confession of powerlessness (jokingly sympathetic *zdzek*), and it is contrasted with the second example, when the ironic poem creates *zdzek* to humiliate the offender (aggressive-offensive *zdzek*). This chapter shows different versions and interpretations of the complicated concept. It is a pity that the photos mentioned in this chapter are not included in the book – it would be easier to see the analysed material rather than only try to visualise it.

The chapter "*Uštipačnost'* and Correctness in Slovak Online Humour" by Nina Cingerová and Irina Dulebová introduces *uštipačnost'* – another concept difficult to translate into English – though it does occur in other Slavic languages in a form that is related by roots and meaning, e.g. Polish *uszczypliwość*. Both terms are versions of Proto-Slavic *ščipati* which means 'separate by cutting', 'to cause pain' also by pinching the skin. It is understood as subtle sarcasm, something that only pinches, stings – teases (p. 130). The analysed texts in the first case deal with the paradoxical linguistic incompetence of the chairman of the Slovak National Party, and in the second they comment on death of the wife and children of a politician who is a popular target of comic interpretations, showing that death of the loved ones is treated as a taboo subject for the majority of commentators. This chapter is very informative and nicely shows the linguistic and cultural scripts – not only ones related to Slovakia but also to the neighbouring nations – e.g. traditional Czech food (pork, dumplings, cabbage) is mentioned (p. 133), and some ethnic tensions in Slovak-Hungarian relations are pointed out.

The last chapter, "Humour of Solidarity in Russian-Speaking Discourse on Social Networking Groups in Lithuania", is written by Anastasija Belovodskaja and Julija Korostenskienė. Contrary to the previously discussed chapters, the community of expats described in this chapter – Russian speaking residents temporarily

or permanently living in Lithuania – are consciously oriented towards positive content of their exchanges, employing strict self-censorship and moderation (p. 140). Their rules of ethics are based on the "let's all get along" rule, which is another allusion to Soviet times in this book – in this case to Cat Leopold, the symbol of friendliness and the protagonist of the cartoon series from the 1970s and 1980s. Other characters from the Soviet cartoons mentioned here are Crocodile Gena and Cheburashka. The authors underline the importance of "«figures of silence» manifested in the exclusion of conflict-prone topics from communication" to foster consolidation with the group (p. 142). The topic analysed in the described case studies are humorous reactions to the pandemic and the abundant forest mushrooms season. The chapter shows that the community successfully concentrates on "eliminating sensitive topics and focusing of comic (re-) interpretation of well-known social and everyday issues" to facilitate the harmonisation of adaptive processes.

The editor's concluding remarks present the results of the study in a synthetic way. Lilia Duskaeva and her team have done a great job presenting lesser-known aspects of humour and the related phenomena in this specific socio-political context. Some chapters deal with different culture-specific notions present in particular languages studied. Post-Soviet topics are present, showing how the past is still vital for the contemporary mainstream narrative of some Slavic cultures. All chapters highlight different aspects of contemporary political life, the opposite points of view on what is seen as humorous or blasphemic, which usually depends on whether we belong to the group that is ridiculed or are involved in making jokes about others. The contrast between "us" and "them" is strongly visible, as who jokes about whom makes a big difference in ethical evaluation of humour. Many case studies analysed discuss thanatological humour, and it is not surprising as sick jokes or disaster jokes are strictly connected with media discourse (Oring 1987; Dundes 1987). The book is clearly organised, has a very well-planned structure and a good methodological background. The analytical tools are used in a convincing way, too. The book is definitely worth reading – it contains very interesting and sometimes terrifying examples that show ethical and unethical faces of humorous interactions.

The topic of humour and ethics is definitely worth discussing, and this publication makes an interesting contribution to the debate on the relations between two subjects. It gives the theoretical background and precise tools to analyse the phenomenon, and also highlights some flash points that triggered heated discussions in the contemporary public sphere of international politics. Some old questions arise while reading the book: Is a strong aggressive reaction (including shaming, swearing, blasphemy, profanity, etc.) toward the ostensibly unethical humorous behaviour ethical? Is it a good excuse to behave unethically in reaction to unethical behaviours?

As a conclusion, let me recall an important statement by Christie Davies – the sociologist of politics and morality, and at the same time a great humour scholar (Davies 1990) – that humour is a form of play, a play with aggression, superiority, and taboo-breaking, and that the humorous aggression has nothing to do with the actual one (cf. special issue in his memory published by *The European Journal of Humour Research* in 2017). While reading „The Ethics of Humour in Online

Slavic Media Communication" in contemporary context you may laugh, but you may also be scared – the choice is yours to make.

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