

Understatement and overstatement in humor. Polish memes about traditions

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Abstract: The paper deals with different possibilities of using humor in Internet memes to enrich teaching culture to students of diverse backgrounds. Selected examples of image macros connected with particular holidays celebrated in Poland were analyzed and presented as a potential illustrative material for discussions about various, sometimes even sensitive subjects such as religion or taboos. The deciphering of understatements and overstatements included in the humorous genres gives an insight into social, political, economic and historical knowledge about particular cultures. Visually attractive material may serve as an inspiration for debates and jocular form of examples makes the intercultural communication easier and learning more rewarding.

Keywords: teaching, tradition, culture, humor, memes

1. Understatement and overstatement as features related to humor

The aim of the paper is to show the overstatements and understatements in the humorous memes and suggest that their explanations can be used for the benefit of foreign language students, trying to understand the culturally relevant messages hidden in seemingly *no-bona-fide* mode of the presented material.

Humor, sarcasm and irony are usually discussed in Slavic literary studies as types of the broader category of *the comic*. In the Anglo-Saxon studies *humor* is the umbrella term for different related issues. The categories are researched vastly by many interdisciplinary scholars, some underlining the complicated nature of the terms used. “A fundamental definitional problem is

examined for humor and irony wherein in neither case can the subclasses of these phenomena be kept distinct. This indeterminacy is reduced to the indeterminacy of indirect speech and implicature, on which irony entirely, and humor, at least largely, rely” (Attardo 2002: 159).

Jocularity, sarcasm, hyperbole, rhetorical questions and understatements are considered to be the five main forms of irony (cf. Wilson 2017). The operational definitions of the two phenomena chosen here are the following: Hyperbole/Overstatement: ‘A description of the state of affairs in obviously exaggerated terms’, (e.g. My three-year-old could do better). Understatement: ‘A description of a state of affairs as clearly less important than it appeared in context’, (e.g. A little more time might have helped) (Leggitt & Gibbs 2000: 5-6).

2. Online memes as examples of contemporary humor

Online and Internet humor is highly popular not only among users, but also among researchers. They often refer to the term *meme* as a cultural concept introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976/2006), “intended to invoke the evolutionary agency of the gene in the ways that thought, behavior, and style disperse through the population” (cf. Weitz 2017). Some scholars distinguish between concepts such as the *viral*, a spreading through the population of a single cultural unit (like a cartoon or video), and the *memetic*, which always includes a combination of elements (Shifman 2014a). Internet meme can be defined as: “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman 2014a: 41). Shifman also writes about three groups of meme genres, based on:

the documentation of real-life moments, explicit manipulation of mass-mediated content, and genres derived from a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content (Shifman 2014a: 18).

The *image macro* amounts to a variation on the old-school, supply-a-caption game for a photograph or other visual image [...]. The usual form feeds on a popular image or photo, with a top and bottom caption. The humor work involves a triangulation among photo, setup and punch line in terms of cultural knowledge and shared experience. The top line might qualify as a punch line in its own right. The bottom line usually extends or tops the joke (Weitz 2017: 510).

Davison, on the other hand, identifies three components to a meme as: 1. The manifestation i.e., ‘its observable, external phenomena,’ for example an image of a cat. 2. The behavior i.e., ‘the action taken by an individual in service of the meme’ for example ‘photographing a cat and manipulating that photograph with software’ 3. The ideal, i.e., the concept conveyed by the meme: ‘the ideal is something like <cats are funny>’ (Davison 2009: 123).

Successful memes, as Knobel & Lankshear (2008: 6) define them, may be considered sophisticated as they include one or more of the following characteristics: (1) some element of humor (absurd, parodying, geeky, etc.); (2) a rich kind of intertextuality, such as wry cross-references to different popular culture events, icons, or phenomena, and/or (3) anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images” (Laineste, Voolaid 2016: 32)¹.

¹ Sophistication e.g. in Polish Covid-19-related memes is discussed by Brzozowska & Chłopicki (forthcoming 2021), who also describe memes as a form of visual humor, based on often contradictory, ethnic stereotypes (Brzozowska & Chłopicki 2019).

Another topic often connected with memes is their intertextuality. Participating with the content, e.g. by sharing, liking, and emulating existing humorous artefacts, constitutes a novel form of intertextuality, which “may have a self-enhancing motive and effect, especially when intertextual connections are established with prestigious or culturally-significant prior texts” (Tsakona & Chovanec 2020: 16).

The relations between different memes are studied as well. Attardo suggests that

rather than generic quiddities, memes, like jokes, enter in three kinds of relationships: 1) the type of relationships that make up jokes and are described in the General Theory of Verbal Humor [...], i. e., the textual knowledge resources that make up the text of the joke/meme, with the caveat that <text> needs to be understood in a broad semiotic sense, including images and other means of signification, e.g., video, music, etc. 2) Intertextual relationships, in which jokes/memes are fully understandable only via a reference to another text: in the case of memes, the founder meme (Shifman 2014b: 59), in the case of jokes, the original joke. 3) Metatextual relationships, in which the joke/meme refers indirectly to its textual nature and <plays> on it (Attardo 2020: 150).

The process of producing new memes is called memeiosis, “hence it is a more active form of engagement with the meme. Memeiosis can consist of repackaging or imitation (Shifman 2014b: 19–20). Imitation can be parodic or not” (Attardo 2020: 154). Attardo also states that “at a very high level of abstraction memetic drift takes generally speaking the form: meme > virality > memeiosis (intertextual) > memeiosis (meta-textual)” (Attardo

2020: 162), and that “the original meme is merely an excuse or a pretext to raise political, cultural, or otherwise newsworthy concerns” (Attardo 2020: 163).

Therefore, it is also “suggested that <intertextuality lies at the heart of humor> (Attardo 2001: 71), as it helps determine what is incompatible or incongruous in a given (con)text” (Tsakona 2020: 171).

3. Memes as the illustrative material for foreign culture or language teaching classes

The paper presents the possibilities given by the humorous texts as used in teaching culture to the representatives of other cultures, on the example of the Polish language. The subject is important as universities become more and more intercultural and people from different backgrounds attend – real or virtual – classes together. Humor is a good facilitator, so the funny materials could be used as a warm-up, separately or in connection with some other exercises. The memes presented in this paper have been collected for the 2019-2020 course in the Polish Culture at Opole University, Poland. The selection of the memes, from the author’s personal WhatsApp account, supplemented where needed by the texts from different internet humoristic sites dealing with specific topics or occasions, consisted of 300 texts, out of which about 80 deal with the tradition or religion topics. The chosen memes are more culture specific than others (some of them keep reoccurring each year) – that are more universal. Both groups may be taken into consideration while discussing related subjects in classes – the former can be used for more advanced students and the latter as a starting point for discussions that would be easier as more recognizable.

Rituals connected with the season changes, or state and religious holidays are a good topic to be introduced in accordance with the calendar. Students get the opportunity to follow how the subjects discussed are relevant for the real life behaviors of the culture representatives. The social, political and historical situation exerts an impact on humorous material, e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic is reflected in the circulation of memes in years 2019-2021 to a large degree. The memes connected with the epidemic are studied elsewhere, so in this paper I use them only in a few cases, sticking to the material that can be benefited from also when the health situation worldwide will be stabilized, but, as the topic was present so frequently, for obvious reasons, the complete omission of it has not been possible.

Humor as a good communication facilitator could be used as an element, which makes intercultural communication easier. The main function connected with the use of the material at class is a possibility to initiate discussions about various subjects: culture, identity, stereotypes, history, well-known people, writings or pieces of art, etc.

The hints understated in the memes, while explained, should lead to information about social life and make students eager to observe, take part and reflect on continuity, repetition, passing away of time, and lead to recognition, defining and sharing own views about ones traditions and rituals.

For the learners of Polish as a foreign language the memes are a huge source of lexemes, phrases, winged-words, and grammatical elements to be learned or recognized. The ethnonyms, borrowings and proper names play an important role as culture carrying elements. There are multiple texts of culture (e.g. movies, books, songs, etc.) mentioned or alluded to in memes, which can be studied with the help of humorous material.

4. Tradition and religion in Polish memes

Poland is considered a Catholic country, so two main Christian holidays – Christmas and Easter – are a good source of knowledge about Polish traditions. They are celebrated in winter and spring periods successively, sometimes they are contrasted. The mocking discussion about their importance is a part of Polish humorous tradition (Stanisławski 2004). Different symbols, artefacts, plants and colors are characteristic for them; each of them has got special culinary traditions, connected with celebrations.

In the following parts we will look at the particular events starting from Christmas preparations, and describe briefly the whole calendar year circle. The idea of Christmas as known in many parts of the world may need to be explained for non-Christians in a more detailed way and for the Christian students of various denominations the differences and similarities in celebrations can be discussed.



Figure 1. Herring, pierogis, borsch, mushroom soup... And what have you done for Christmas? Nails².

²[https://www.facebook.com/tipsforwomen.pl.blog/photos/pb.1599222010122213, 15.01.2021.](https://www.facebook.com/tipsforwomen.pl.blog/photos/pb.1599222010122213,15.01.2021)

The meme can be used to teach some vocabulary connected with house and table arrangements (Christmas tree, candles, etc.) and traditional Polish cuisine and dishes prepared for Christmas (herring, different types of fish – carp, borsch, mushroom soup) served on Christmas Eve, as the supper of December, 24th, is the highlight of family celebrations. The understated roles of women responsible for meal preparations are subverted and ridiculed in the example as well. The gender stereotypes are used also in the next meme – related to the 6th of January – Epiphany, called Three Kings’ or Three Wise Men’s holidays.



Figure 2. And when the three Wise Men have left, three Wise women arrived. [Bringing] Napkins, ready-made food, wine³.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/calaresztapl/photos/baba-bab%C4%99-zrozumie-,2025171650896825/>, 6.01.2020.

Żona mówi do męża: masz tu 200 na szopkę wigilijną. Jak ci coś zostanie z tych pieniędzy to możesz sobie kupić piwo



Figure 3. A wife says to her husband: take 200 zlotys to buy a nativity scene. You can use the spare change to buy yourself some beer⁴.

In both cases (Fig. 2, Fig. 3) the custom of building nativity scenes in churches could be mentioned and their visiting advised, as churches are usually open for public visits. The information about main characters – Baby Jesus, Holy Mary, and Saint Joseph can be introduced at this point. While talking about monarch figures, (Fig. 2), the three gifts brought originally by the kings should be mentioned, as they had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death. In the meme the traditional symbolic gifts were replaced by more practical items: napkins, ready-made food and wine, switching perspectives, and constituting comical scripts oppositions (as defined by Raskin 1985, 2008): male/female, heavenly/down to earth.

The Three Wise Men are traditionally known as Casper, Melchior and Balthazar and the (C+M+B – meaning “Christus

⁴ <https://m.demotywatory.pl/5039886>, 29.11.2020.

Mansionem Benedicat”: Christ blesses the house) is written on the doors during the annual priests visit to parish members. The names of the Biblical kings (Fig. 4) were replaced by the vodka brands – named after historical Polish kings: Bolesław Chrobry [in English: Bolesław the Brave] (992-1025), Jan III Sobieski [John III Sobieski] (1674 -1696), Stefan Batory [Stephen Báthory] (1575 -1586) – , making the down to earth and profane contrast with religious aspects. The auto-stereotype of Poles drinking vodka was also brought up.



Figure 4. Three Kings’ Holiday. Welcome them properly⁵.

Carnival season ends with Ash Wednesday, which is preceded by Fat Thursday (last Thursday before Lent). It brings the last opportunity for feasting until Easter, as a day dedicated to eating sweets – mainly *pączki* (doughnuts), which are large deep-fried pieces of especially rich dough, traditionally filled with plum or rose petal jam (or other fillings) and topped with powdered sugar, icing, glaze, or angel wings (*faworki*) - French dough fingers served with powdered sugar. The custom dates back to pagan times and it is related with hopes for winter ending⁶. This optimistic message of spring coming is literarily illustrated in Fig. 5.:

⁵ http://fifek.pl/6826/trzech_kroli.html, 6.01.2015.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fat_Thursday, 5.01.2021.

**Na drzewach pojawiły się już
pierwsze pączki:**



Figure 5. There have already appeared early *pączki* [double meaning and word-play in Polish: buds/ doughnuts] on the trees⁷.

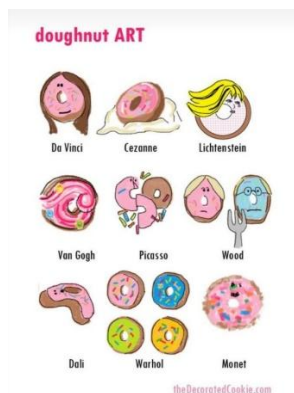


Figure 6. Doughnut art⁸.

⁷ <https://demotywatory.pl/4843027/Na-drzewach-pojawily-sie-juz-pierwsze-paczki->, 3.04.2018.

⁸ <https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/101753272804032876>, 15.01.2021.

Different types of doughnuts, as pictured in Fig. 6, can be used to initiate discussions not only about traditionally eaten sweets or desserts in various countries – recipes could be shared –, but also about visual representation of the most characteristic symbols, buildings, artefacts, etc. and famous painters and their works. This meme is more culturally universal than the previous one, and seems to be borrowed from English language sites.

During Easter the resurrection of Christ is celebrated both in churches and among relatives and friends, who usually receive Easter postcards – some with lay symbols: eggs, bunnies, chicks, fresh branches, buds, and others with lambs (symbol of Jesus) or Christ himself, as pictured in the meme.



Figure 7. Policeman: “You should not be leaving [the house]. [Will you accept] a fine of 500 zlotys or shall we bring the case to court?”⁹.

The Polish tradition requires the entire extended family to gather on the Easter morning to have a festive breakfast and wish each other “happy Easter”. Church ceremonies, including blessing of the food in specially prepared baskets, can be explained to the class. The meme is strictly time related and alludes to the situation

⁹ <https://bialostockie.eu/wasilkow/27928-a-dokad-to-obywatelu-pandemia-koronawirusa-z-przymruzeniem-oka-memy>, 13.04.2020.

in which, due to the outbreak of 2020's pandemic, Easter celebrations were suspended, and family visits were publicly discouraged during the holiday weekend in Poland. In the picture Christ is presented leaving his place of residence (his tomb in this case), and the policeman tries to prevent this by imposing a fine (this is meant to bring to mind the guards at the tomb mentioned in the Gospels). There is a visual clash between the 2000-year-old gown and the contemporary uniform (evidently Polish – notice type of cap with eagle and the *Policja* inscription on the vest), underlining the incongruity between freedom, happiness and salvation on the one hand, and quarantine, threat, and punishment on the other hand.

Similarly, the second day of Easter, called *śmigus-dyngus* or *lany poniedziałek* (“pouring/ wet Monday”) was completely different under new pandemic circumstances. Traditionally boys/ men were pouring water on girls that day. The custom is connected with pagan times and its aim is to bring good luck, fertility and evoke the spring rains. Girls could avoid soaking by giving boys “ransoms” of painted eggs (*pisanki*), treated as magical charms that would bring good harvests, successful relationships and healthy childbirths. There were no possibilities, apart from pouring of water (or cologne) in private, to practice the customs on the streets, while “stay-at-home” policy with sanitary regime was introduced.



Figure 8. Wet Monday 2019 and 2020¹⁰.

All Saints' Day (the 1st of November) preceding All Souls' Day (2nd of November) are important holidays connected with the cult of the deceased.



Figure 9. Only reminding you. We celebrate All Saints' Day in Poland, not a Halloween¹¹.

¹⁰ <https://www.se.pl/tarnow/galeria/smigus-dyngus-w-czasach-koronawirusa-najlepsze-memy-na-lany-poniedzialek/gg-PDQc-87K9-8Qrp/gp-eZjm-D4Z7-wdBT>, 12.01.2021.

In sharp contrast to Halloween, it is rather a solemn occasion, when whole families in Poland meet at cemeteries, laying flowers and placing ever-burning fires on the graves of their relatives, friends and neighbors. Beliefs in after life, funeral traditions, cult of ancestors, literature connected with those themes could be discussed in relation to this holiday's topic.

Santa Claus is popular in many countries, but he visits homes on different days. He brings presents to children in Poland on the 6th of December. The meme can be a good starting point for discussing various aspects of the tradition, but also such topics as etiquette of giving and receiving presents, meaning of names. Subjects related to cloths, fashion, decency in showing body parts, sports and body building or animal symbolism could be debated as well.



Figure 10. Santa Claus comes to the good (behaving) girls. His helpers come to the bad ones¹².

¹¹ <https://demotywatory.pl/4887472/Tylko-tak-dla-przypomnienia-W-Polsce-obchodzimy-dzien>, 11.01.2021.

¹² <https://demotywatory.pl/4719973/Do-grzecznych-dziewczynek-przychodzi-Mikolaj>, 6.2.2020.

December brings Christmas time again. In this way the year has made a full circle. My main focus here was on some chosen holidays but when we add the public holidays, other celebrations and important dates (1st of January, 1st of May, 3rd of May, 1st of June, 15th of August, 1st of September, 11th of November, etc.) we will have more than one topic to discuss every month.

5. Conclusions

The memes shown in the academic year cycle, when related to the approaching holidays and the ritual year can be used to illustrate different culture related issues. When presented in foreign language classes – in this case Polish as a foreign language – they can make learning of lexical material easier and more pleasant. Simpler examples can be used for the beginners A1-A2 level, while for the students with B1-C2 knowledge of Polish more complicated structures, phrases, idioms, winged words or sophisticated texts can be useful. The selected material can be related to culturally relevant texts, traditions and customs, it may facilitate understanding and remembering of vital dates and events. Social and political context of humorous material should be taken into consideration to make the actual situation understandable. Comparative studies can be undertaken by students of different backgrounds to develop their cultural awareness and humorous competence. Discovering the understatements and debating the overstatements in humorous material may be a satisfying game to be played while learning.

Disputes on ethnic stereotypes, gender roles, and taboo subjects in the relaxed atmosphere of acceptance should help meetings to be kept interesting and relevant. The diversified sources can influence the development of a sound sense of humor,

while additionally making the classes more interesting and more enjoyable.

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