

Humour in English Everyday Life

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<p>Opinnäytetyön nimi Humour in English Everyday Life</p>	<p>Sivumäärä 41</p>
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<p>Tämä opinnäytetyö on tehty toimeksiantona Bellcrest Käännökset Oy:lle. Tarvetta mihinkään tiettyyn aiheeseen ei ollut, joten kiinnostuksen perusteella brittiläiseen kulttuuriin aiheeksi valittiin englantilainen huumori.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on ymmärtää englantilaista kulttuuria ja huumoria sekä sitä, miten huumori ilmenee eri muodoissaan jokapäiväisessä englantilaisessa elämässä ja viestinnässä. Opinnäytetyö ei liity komediaan. Yhtenä tavoitteena on myös opinnäytetyön hyödyllisyys niille, jotka ovat lähdössä Englantiin esimerkiksi opiskelemaan tai työskentelemään.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyö perustuu pääasiassa kirjalliseen aineistoon. Empiirisenä materiaalina on käytetty haastatteluita ja sähköpostiviestejä, joista on etsitty tietoa englantilaisesta huumorista sekä sen ilmenemistapoja. Näiden lisäksi on käytetty omaa havainnointia.</p> <p>Tutkimus aloitettiin keväällä 2007, ja haastattelut tehtiin kevään ja kesän 2007 aikana, miltä ajalta myös sähköpostiviestit ovat. Muuta materiaalia on työstetty vähitellen kevästä 2007 keväeseen 2009.</p> <p>Huumori on hyvin tärkeä osa englantilaista kulttuuria ja jokapäiväistä englantilaista elämää ja viestintää. Huumoria on erilaisia tyyppjejä. Ulkomaalaisen ei välttämättä ole helppo ymmärtää englantilaista huumoria, mutta sen ymmärtäminen on silti tärkeä osa sopeutumista englantilaiseen kulttuuriin.</p>	
<p>Asiasanat Huumori, ironia, pilailu, englantilaiset, englantilaisuus, kulttuuri.</p>	

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<p>This thesis is written as an assignment for Bellcrest Translations Ltd. There was no requirement for any specific subject, so on the basis of interest in British culture, English humour was chosen as the subject.</p> <p>The objective of the thesis is to understand English culture and humour, and how humour appears in its various forms in English everyday life and communication. The thesis is not about comedy. One of the aims is the usefulness of the thesis to those leaving for England, for example, to study or work.</p> <p>The thesis is mainly based on written material. Interviews and email messages have been used as empirical material; they have been studied to learn about English humour and the forms in which it appears. Personal observation is used in addition to these.</p> <p>The study was started in spring 2007; the interviews were made during the spring and summer 2007, and the email messages are also from that period. Other material has been gradually processed from spring 2007 to spring 2009.</p> <p>Humour is very important part of English culture and English everyday life and communication. There are various types of humour. It may be difficult for a foreigner to understand English humour, but understanding it is very important part of adapting to English culture.</p>	
<p>Key words Humour, irony, joking, the Englishman, Englishness, culture.</p>	

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1 Introduction

However earnest this may sound, there has always been a special place in my heart for English humour. No one can make fun of things like the English. They have got a brilliant sense of humour and there is neither a place nor a time they would not use it. I find English humour so fascinating with all its quirks and strange rules, and that is why I chose the subject.

When people asked me what I was writing my thesis about, some of them were actually stunned by my subject. Apparently it is not as scientific and 'useful' as it should be. The reaction of many was 'So you've been watching quite a lot of Monty Python, then?' Well, of course I have, but this thesis is not about comedy, but about the everyday kind of English humour.

In the first chapters I will handle the questions and the problem to which I wanted to find answers, and then move on to the theoretical background of my research about English humour. In the third chapter I will tell about the collecting and analysing methods of the empirical data and in the next chapter, the results of it. Finally, a conclusion is drawn of all the data.

1.1 The Problem

My main problem is 'How does humour appear in English everyday life?'

I want to find out what kind of role humour has in English everyday communication, and what kind of impact it has on people.

I also have several sub questions.

How often/much does humour appear in English everyday life?

In what kinds of situations do the English use humour?

I know the English use humour much, but I want to find out how often and how much exactly they use it, and in what kinds of situations.

Do the English use humour consciously?

I also want to find out whether the English use humour consciously; if they consider how and when to do it; or if it is just a natural part of their communication.

What types of English humour are there?

I am familiar with English irony, but I want to find out if there are other forms of humour as well.

Do social classes have an impact on the English use of humour?

I also want to find out whether social classes have any sort of impact on humour – if humour is different in each social class, or whether the class differences themselves are made fun of.

What is the role of humour in adapting to English culture? How important is it?

I want to know how important a part humour is in English communication, and if outsiders can understand it. Is it easy to adapt to the English culture without understanding their humour? How can you cope at work, for example, if you do not understand the English sense of humour?

1.2 The Purpose of the Research

In this thesis I am trying to find out how humour appears in English everyday life, and why, how and when the English use humour. My aim is to understand the English culture and communication, and the humour used in them.

1.3 Requirement for the Research

I did my internship for Bellcrest Translations Ltd, a translation company in Helsinki. As I have always been very interested in and enthusiastic about the British and British culture, and because there was no requirement for a thesis of any specific subject, I chose the cultural differences between the English and the Finnish as my subject. Having done research for a while, I realised I wanted to study something more specific and more English, so I changed my subject to English humour and how it appears in English everyday life.

If you are planning a trip abroad, or perhaps even planning to move there to study or work, it is very important to understand the culture of the country. Every culture is different and there may be some things that are very difficult for an outsider to understand. There are many such things in English culture, and English sense of humour is one of them.

I hope this thesis to be useful to anyone planning to visit or move to England and who thus has to adapt to the English culture and understand the English.

1.4 The Research Methods

This is a qualitative research. My thesis is mainly based on theoretical documentary material. As my main source I have used the book 'Watching the English' by Kate Fox, an English social anthropologist. I have also used some other books about both English and British cultures for different points of view and more information.

I have also used empirical material in the thesis. I have interviewed four people, both Finnish and English, in order to gain information and opinions on both of these cultures. In the beginning, I was going to do this research about the cultural differences between the Finnish and the English, but then realised that I wanted to concentrate on English humour.

In addition to the interviews I have used some email messages as my material. These messages were conversations between an English person and myself. I have tried to look for signs of specific types of English humour in these messages.

Personal observation is an important method that I have used in this research, and I have used it with both the interviews and email conversations.

2 Theoretical Background

My thesis is mainly based on theoretical documentary material. My main source is the book 'Watching the English' by Kate Fox, an English social anthropologist. The book tells about Englishness and about the hidden, unspoken rules of English behaviour, and about what those rules tell us about the English national identity. As her main research method Fox has used participant observation.

I have also used some other books, such as 'How to Be an Alien' and 'Shakespeare and Myself' by the Hungarian humorist George Mikes. He writes in a very English and humorous manner, and I think his remarks are brilliant.

I also found Rupert Haigh's book, *Business Brief: Britain*, very useful, but some of his explanations for British people's behaviour differed very much from those of Kate Fox's. Several of my sources deal with the British, not only the English.

Adrian Room's *Dictionary of Britain* was a very useful book, not only for learning about humour, but also 'getting to know' the British better. However, I did not find David McDowall's *Britain in Close-up. An In-depth Study of Contemporary Britain* very useful at all. He tells about the British life; about the government, working, religion and entertainment, but I could not find a single word about humour, which I think is a very important thing to even mention in a book such as this.

Christine Hall is a German and has worked in several countries. She has worked in Britain as a bilingual secretary, personal assistant, translator and magazine editor before setting up her own editing business. I have used her book 'Living & Working in Britain. How to Obtain Entry and Settle in Successfully.' for this thesis.

2.1 The English

The English are not to be confused with the British. The English are English; the British may be English, Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish. Do not call a Scot, a Welsh, or a Northern Irish, English. They will be offended – imagine someone calling a Finn a Swede (which often happens, by the way).

According to Haigh, the stereotypical English person is usually portrayed as polite, unemotional, repressed, quiet, un-intellectual, humorous, and modest. He thinks this stereotype is rather dated and only true about the southern English middle class. He continues by saying that the Northern English tend to be more vigorous and direct, while people from Liverpool and Newcastle scarcely consider themselves part of England at all. There are also significant cultural differences between the north and south of England, with the south more prosperous, and the north poorer. (Haigh 2004, 132.)

According to Ronowicz, people tend to make assumptions about the behaviour of others on the basis of understanding motivations and assumptions that drive their own behaviour. These are known as cultural stereotypes. Like myths, they are often only partly true, or even quite wrong. He also thinks that it cannot be emphasised too strongly that myths and cultural stereotypes are generalisations and are never really true about the entire community. Members of different communities hold different, even quite opposite stereotypes about the same thing. (Ronowicz & Yallop 1999, 11.)

As Michael Sharwood-Smith has said:

To be special, to have a separate identity, means being rather mysterious to outsiders. Some cultures appear to be more mysterious to outsiders than others. - - - It is not always a good thing to behave like an insider, especially when you only know a little. Being an obvious outsider can elicit sympathy from insiders: they recognize you as being deficient and in need of help. But, despite the risks attached to appearing to be 'too good' in a foreign language and culture, knowing about the more subtle or less explicitly mentioned aspects of the target culture brings tremendous benefits in terms of insights and feeling at home in a language. (Ronowicz & Yallop 1999, 46-47.)

The English may be considered rather mysterious by outsiders, as their behaviour, especially their humour, is not always understood. But understanding English humour will prove to be very helpful.

There are several unwritten rules of Englishness. These rules are definitely not universally obeyed in English society – naturally, there are exceptions. These unwritten rules are normal and usual behaviour, and help to understand the English character. (Fox 2005, 10.)

2.2 Social Classes

class IN SOCIETY 5 - - - one of the groups of people in a society that are thought of as being at the same social or economic level: *the working / middle / upper class. The party tries to appeal to all classes of society. the professional classes.* 6 - - - the way that people are divided into different social and economic groups: *differences of class, race or gender. the class system. a society in which class is more important than ability* (Hornby 2003, 212.)

U - - - (life and society) A somewhat dated term used half-humorously for a word or action that is socially acceptable, for example, saying 'sofa' instead of the non-U equivalent 'settee', or having plain carpets in one's house as distinct from non-U wall-to-wall patterned ones. [initial of 'upper class'] (Room 1987, 344.)

non-U - - - (life and society) A somewhat dated term used half-humorously for a word or action that is socially unacceptable, for example, saying 'toilet' instead of 'lavatory', or tucking a serviette (also regarded as a non-U word) into one's collar when dining. Compare U. (Room 1987, 214.)

According to McDowall, those who think that Britain is a class-ridden society, usually think of the contrast between the old moneyed 'upper class' and the underclass of dependent, unemployed or homeless people. He says that these two extremes are where there is least social mobility, but there is huge social mobility in between them. (McDowall 2002, 95.)

As George Mikes said in 1961:

English society is a class society, strictly organised almost on corporative lines. If you doubt this, listen to the weather forecasts. There is always a different weather forecast for farmers. You often hear statements like this on the radio:

"To-morrow it will be cold, cloudy and foggy; long periods of rain will be interrupted by short periods of showers."

And then:

"Weather forecast for farmers. It will be fair and warm, many hours of sunshine."

You must not forget that the farmers do grand work of national importance and deserve better weather. (Mikes 1961, 22.)

I wonder if the English weather forecast really is like this. Or rather, was in the 1960s. Is it meant to be humorous, and does it really concern class differences?

Social classes are an important thing in England, and a very important thing for a foreigner to understand. I will get back to classes in the chapter 2.7, Humour and Class.

2.3 About English humour

Sense of humour - - - (English/British sense of humour) (daily life) The humour believed to be characteristic of the British, or specifically of the English (since there are also regional Scottish, Irish and Welsh senses of humour). It includes a love of 'double entendre' (a word or phrase meaning two things at the same time, one 'proper', one 'improper' or vulgar), self-mockery and an enjoyment of what is absurd and eccentric. Much English humour originated in the music-halls, and is seen today in the performances of comedians in working men's clubs, pantomimes and, most of all, on radio and television. (Room 1987, 296.)

According to Haigh, British people like to keep their communication light and humorous, even when they are discussing serious matters. He says that an over-serious approach does not go down very well. According to Kate Fox's theory that I will tell more about later, seriousness and earnestness are things the English avoid until the very end. (Haigh 2004, 138.)

The same thing applies with what Haigh says about the British people 'trying to keep up a front of cheerfulness at all times', with the example of the only possible response to the question 'How are you?' being 'I'm fine'. According to him the very last response a British person would want is a detailed reply to the question. (Haigh 2004, 138.)

Of course, I think this is very true, but I also think Haigh's and Fox's theories differ a great deal, but that might be because Haigh is a lawyer and an entrepreneur, and Fox is a social anthropologist. Even though Haigh is talking about the British and Fox only about the English, I trust Fox more in this and many other matters. Her theories just make sense to me.

Haigh says that as long as you can learn to interpret the subtleties of British communication and realise the degree to which irony and humour are engrained in British way of doing things, empathising with British people is not difficult. He also says that one should keep his communication with the British light and humorous, just like mentioned above. You should also be prepared for jokes and show appreciation of good humour. (Haigh 2004, 145.)

The British use humour for several purposes. In business situations, you must show that you not only understand their humour, but also the value of it, in order to gain the trust and respect of your British colleagues. Over-seriousness should be avoided. (Haigh 2004, 148.)

According to Terry Tan, a wry sense of humour is very British, and the Scottish, Welsh and English all have a similar, refreshing, self-deprecating sense of humour. He also says that you

should not take offence if the British make jokes about you. If anyone was being deliberately vicious, racist or rude, they would not bother to make a joke out of it. (Tan 1999, 45-46.)

I think this is very true, as particularly the English constantly laugh at themselves and each other.

According to Salminen & Poutanen, discussions with the British are full of hints and shades of meaning, whatever this may mean – perhaps it refers to irony. Humour is used very much, also in negotiations. According to them, a Finn may find it difficult to understand ironical remarks or jocular stories. Humour is often used to cover an embarrassing situation or aggressiveness. A Brit expects the other party to be able to tell jokes and funny stories. (Salminen & Poutanen 1996, 38.)

Do they really? I think they just expect them to understand and appreciate their sense of humour, and be humorous; but not necessarily telling jokes.

Salminen & Poutanen continue by saying that privacy is part of being polite. It would be bad manners to talk about oneself, but one may tell a funny story about a ridiculous situation one has got into. (Salminen & Poutanen 1996, 39.)

In his book 'Shakespeare and Myself', Mikes refers to Shakespeare by saying: 'Jokes may be all right in tragedies and in any other kind of gloomy literature which needs light relief but they are quite out of place in serious humour.' (Mikes 1958, 7.)

As in many other matters, I totally agree with Mikes here. He talks about serious humour here, but I am not exactly sure what he means by it; although, I think I have a feeling about it. Having read and agreed with this, I just could not accept that some of my sources combine jokes with Englishness.

Mikes continues later: 'But good humour is not an ability to describe things in a "funny light"– i.e. to pretend that things are what they are not; it is an ability to see things as they really are and not as they pretend to be. Humour is not a joke; it is just a way of looking at things.' (Mikes 1958, 16.)

According to Kate Fox, the real 'defining characteristic' about English humour is the value the English put on humour, the central importance of humour in English culture and social

interactions. ‘In other cultures, there is ‘a time and a place’ for humour; it is a special, separate kind of talk. In English conversation, there is always an undercurrent of humour.’ (Fox 2005, 61.)

The English do value and appreciate their humour; it is an important part of their culture, and it is present everywhere.

Almost every English conversation involves at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, understatement, humorous self-deprecation, mockery or just silliness. Humour is the English ‘default mode’ – they do not have to switch it on and they cannot switch it off. (Fox 2005, 61-62.)

Unlike to people in other cultures, where there usually is a separate time and a place for humour, it is a natural part of Englishness.

There are many types of English humour. I have heard examples of these before, but have not known their names – or did not really know they actually existed as types of humour. In the next chapters I will handle some rules of humour.

2.4 Bonding-talk

one-upmanship (life and society) A semi-humorous term used to define the ‘art’ of gaining an advantage, usually by cunning or bluff, over others, especially with reference to social or intellectual superiority. The term was invented by the comic author Stephen Potter for his book of that name (1952). Compare *gamesmanship*. [from ‘one up’, in sense ‘one point higher’, ‘one point ahead’] (Room 1987, 224.)

English bonding-talk rituals have certain important features in common in their underlying rules and values; both require polite hypocrisy and humour. In both cases, etiquette triumphs over truth and reason. (Fox 2005, 57.)

2.4.1 Female-bonding

Female bonding-talk is about compliments and self-deprecation. Fox calls this the ‘Counter-compliment Rule’.

This often starts with ritual exchange of compliments. The opening line may be either a straight compliment, such as ‘Oh, I like your new haircut!’ or a combination of a compliment and a self-critical remark: ‘Your hair looks great; I wish I had gorgeous hair like you – mine’s so boring and mousy.’ The counter-compliment rule requires that the response to either version contains a self-deprecating denial, and a ‘counter-compliment’, as in ‘Oh no! My hair’s terrible. It gets so frizzy – I wish I could have it short like you, but I just don’t have the bone structure; you’ve got such good cheekbones.’ This must be countered with another self-critical denial, and a further compliment, which prompts yet another self-deprecating denial and yet another counter-compliment, and so the ritual continues. (Fox 2005, 53.)

There are social ‘points’ to be gained by making amusing, witty self-critical remarks – some English women have turned this kind of humorous self-deprecation into an art form, and there can almost be an element of competitiveness in their one-downmanship. (Fox 2005, 53-54.)

2.4.2 Male-bonding

English men have different means of achieving social bonding. While English women pay each other compliments, English men put each other down. Male-bonding is about the ‘Mine’s Better Than Yours’ rule, as Kate Fox calls it. ‘Mine’ can be anything; a make of car, a football team, or a type of beer. (Fox 2005, 54-55.)

The rules of the game are like this: You start either by making a statement in praise of your chosen ‘Mine’ or by challenging someone else’s assertion, or implication, that his ‘Mine’ is the best. Your statement will always be challenged, even if the other male (or males) secretly agrees with you, or could not rationally disagree. (Fox 2005, 55.)

These exchanges may sometimes become rather noisy, also involving name-calling and swearing, but there is always an undercurrent of humour present. There is a mutual understanding that the differences of opinion are not to be taken too seriously. The game is all about mock anger, pretend outrage, and jokey one-upmanship. However strongly you may feel about your ‘Mine’, you must not allow your feelings to show – it is just a game. Any hint of boasting is severely frowned upon, unless it is done ‘ironically’, in such an exaggerated manner as to be clearly intended as a joke. (Fox 2005, 55-56.)

It is universally understood that there is no way of actually winning the game. No-one ever recognises the other's point of view. The participants just get tired or bored, and change the subject. They may even shake their heads in pity at their opponent's stupidity. (Fox 2005, 56). I once saw this happen in Scotland, between two Scottish males (about Celtic FC and Rangers FC, if my memory serves me right), but only realised later that what I saw was actually male-bonding. So this may in fact be a British bonding method, not merely an English one.

2.5 The Importance of Not Being Earnest

2.5.1 Distinctions

At the most basic level, an underlying rule in all English conversation is the proscription of 'earnestness'. Although they may not have a monopoly on humour, or even on irony (as Kate Fox says, although I disagree with her here – the English have a monopoly on humour, at least in my world), the English are probably more acutely sensitive than any other nation to the distinction between 'serious' and 'solemn', between 'sincerity' and 'earnestness'. (Fox 2005, 62.)

serious

Not silly **4** thinking about things in a careful and sensible way; not silly; *Be serious for a moment; this is important. I'm afraid I'm not a very serious person.*

Not joking **5** (**about sb/sth**) ~ (**about doing sth**) sincere about sth; not joking or meant as a joke: *Believe me, I'm **deadly** (=extremely) **serious**. Don't laugh, it's a serious suggestion. Is she serious about wanting to sell the house? He's really serious about Penny and wants to get engaged.* (Hornby 2003, 1167.)

solemn

adj.

1 (of a person) not happy or smiling; looking very serious: *Her face grew solemn. a solemn expression*

2 *done, said, etc. in a very serious and sincere way: a solemn oath / undertaking / vow*

3 (of a religious ceremony or formal occasion) performed in a serious way: *a solemn festival / ceremony / ritual* (Hornby 2003, 1228.)

sincere

adj. (superlative **sincerest**, no comparative)

1 (of feelings, beliefs or behaviour) showing what you really think or feel SYN GENUINE: *a sincere attempt to resolve the problem. sincere concern / gratitude / regret. Please accept our sincere thanks. a sincere apology.*

2 ~ (**in sth**) (of a person) saying only what you really think or feel. SYN HONEST: *He seemed sincere enough when he said he wanted to help. She is never completely sincere in what she says about people.* (Hornby 2003, 1201.)

earnest

adj. very serious and sincere: *an earnest young man. Despite her earnest efforts, she could not find a job.*
(Hornby 2003, 396.)

‘The Importance of Not Being Earnest Rule’ is really quite simple. ‘Seriousness is acceptable, solemnity is prohibited. Sincerity is allowed, earnestness is strictly forbidden. Pomposity and self-importance are outlawed.’ (Fox 2005, 62.)

This distinction is crucial to any kind of understanding of Englishness. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough: if you are not able to grasp these subtle but vital differences, you will never understand the English - and even if you speak the language fluently, you will never feel or appear entirely at home in conversation with the English. Your English may be impeccable, but your behavioural ‘grammar’ will be full of glaring errors. (Fox 2005, 62.)

‘Serious matters can be spoken of seriously, but one must not take *oneself* too seriously.’ The English ability to laugh at themselves is one of their most endearing characteristics. (Fox 2005, 62.)

2.5.2 The ‘Oh, come off it!’ Rule

If someone is being earnest, the response will be this.

A speaker, or anyone overdoing the intensity and crossing the fine line from sincerity to earnestness, will be spotted and picked up on immediately, with scornful cries of ‘Oh, come off it!’ (Fox 2005, 63.)

The English do not take themselves too seriously, and do not want anyone else to do so, either.

2.6 Irony

irony

(pl. -ies)

1 the amusing or strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what you expect; a situation like this: ***The irony is that** when he finally got the job, he discovered he didn’t like it. It was one of life’s little ironies.*

2 the use of words that say the opposite of what you really mean, often as a joke and with a tone of voice that shows this: *‘England is famous for its food,’ she said with heavy irony. There was a note of irony in his voice. a hint / trace of irony* (Hornby 2003, 687.)

According to Fox, the English are not given to patriotic boasting – the combination of both of these sins, patriotism and boasting, is doubly distasteful. However, there is an exception to this rule, and it is the pride the English take in their sense of humour – particularly in their use of irony. According to Fox, there is a popular belief that English sense of humour is better, more subtle, and more highly developed than that of any other country. (Fox 2005, 64.)

I totally agree with her – I think the English sense of humour is really something to be proud of.

It must be said that many of my foreign informants found this aspect of Englishness frustrating, rather than amusing: ‘The problem with the English,’ complained one American visitor ‘is that you never know when they are joking – you never know whether they are being serious or not’. This was a businessman, travelling with a female colleague from Holland. She considered the issue frowningly for a moment, and then concluded, somewhat tentatively, ‘I think they are mostly joking, yes?’

She had a point. And I felt rather sorry for both of them. I found in my interviews with foreign visitors that the English predilection for irony posed more of a problem for those here on business than for tourists and other pleasure-seekers. (Fox 2005, 65.)

Understanding irony, and understanding the English on the whole, can be very difficult for foreigners, whether they are in England on holiday, studying or working – especially negotiating a very important business deal. (Fox 2005, 65-66.)

Therefore, I think, it is extremely important that you get to know the culture you will be dealing with.

According to Fox, the most important rule to remember is that irony is endemic. Like any kind of humour, irony is a normal element of ordinary, everyday conversation. The English may not always be joking, but they are always *in a state of readiness* for humour. They do not always say the opposite of what they mean, but are always alert to the *possibility* of irony. When an English person asks someone a straightforward question, such as ‘How are the children?’, he or she is equally prepared for either a straightforward response, such as ‘Fine, thanks.’ or an ironic one ‘Oh, they’re delightful – charming, helpful, tidy, studious . . .’, to which the correct reply is ‘Oh dear. Been one of those days, has it?’ (Fox 2005, 66.)

I just love this kind of irony, because I think it is so English. You do not always have to be joking, but you are prepared for it. I think this kind of irony could be classified as serious humour. But here come the jokes again, and I do not know what to think about it; do the English really joke much, or is it just other kinds of humour – serious humour?

According to Fox (2004; Alan Bennett, 1978) a character in a play by Alan Bennett has said, 'The English are 'conceived in irony. We float in it from the womb. It's the amniotic fluid . . . Joking but not joking. Caring but not caring. Serious but not serious.' (Fox 2005, 65-66.)

2.6.1 Understatement

understatement

1 a statement that makes sth seem less important, impressive, serious, etc. than it really is: *To say we were pleased is an understatement (=we were extremely pleased).* 'These figures are a bit disappointing.' 'That's got to be **the understatement of the year.**'

2 the practice of making things seem less impressive, important, serious, etc. than they really are: *typical English understatement. He always goes for subtlety and understatement in his movies.* OPP OVERSTATEMENT (Hornby 2003, 1413.)

English understatement is a form of irony. According to Fox, George Mikes has said in 1984 that the understatement 'is not just a speciality of the English sense of humour; it is a way of life.' The English are rightly renowned for their use of understatement – not because they invented it or because they do it better than anyone else, but because they do it so much. (Fox 2005, 66.)

The strict prohibitions on earnestness, gushing or emoting and boasting of the English require almost constant use of understatement. Rather than risk showing any hint of forbidden solemnity, unseemly emotion or excessive zeal, the English go to the opposite extreme and feign dry, deadpan indifference. (Fox 2005, 66.)

A painful, chronic illness or anything that is disastrous, traumatic and horrible, must be described as 'a bit of a nuisance'; a truly horrific experience 'well, not exactly what I would have chosen'; a sight of breathtaking beauty 'quite pretty'; an unforgivably stupid misjudgement 'not very clever'; something outstandingly brilliant 'not bad'; someone who is abominably cruel 'not very friendly'; and any exceptionally delightful object or person 'nice' or even 'very nice'. (Fox 2005, 67, 403.)

But the English themselves do not find understatement very funny. 'At best, a well-timed, well-turned understatement only raises a slight smirk. But then, this is surely the whole point of the understatement: it is amusing, but only in an understated way.' The English understatement is a restrained, refined, subtle form of humour. (Fox 2005, 67.)

The understatement is part of being English, and a natural way of speaking and communicating. It is funny, but only in an understated way.

The English understatement is generally not understood by foreigners. But those who appreciate it and find it amusing, still experience considerable difficulties when they try to do it themselves. (Fox 2005, 67.)

I would love to be able to do the understatement in the right, English way myself, but I do not really think you could learn to do it right. It just comes naturally. You would have to be English.

According to Kate Fox, the English themselves are not conscious of obeying the understatement rule; it is somehow wired into their brains. They are not taught the use of the understatement, but they learn it by osmosis. It 'comes naturally' because it is deeply ingrained in their culture and part of the English psyche. (Fox 2005, 68.)

The English understatement is also difficult for foreigners to understand because it is actually an in-joke about unwritten rules of English humour. When the English describe a horrendous, traumatic and painful experience as 'not very pleasant', they are acknowledging the taboo on earnestness and the rules of irony, but at the same time making fun of their own ludicrously rigid obedience to those codes. They are exercising restraint, but in such an exaggerated manner that they are also quietly laughing at themselves for doing so. 'Every understatement is a little private joke about Englishness.' (Fox 2005, 68.)

So the English may be conscious of the rules about humour in some way. When making an understatement, they are quietly laughing at Englishness, English humour, and, of course, themselves.

According to George Mikes: 'Foreigners have souls; the English haven't. - - - The English have no soul; they have the understatement instead.' He also gives a good example:

‘If a continental youth wants to declare his love to a girl, he kneels down, tells her that she is the sweetest, the most charming and ravishing person in the world, that she has something in her, something peculiar and individual which only a few hundred thousand other women have and that he would be unable to live one more minute without her. Often, to give a little more emphasis to the statement, he shoots himself on the spot. This is a normal, week-day declaration of love in the more temperamental continental countries. In England the boy pats his adored one on the back and says softly: ‘I don’t object to you, you know.’ If he is quite mad with passion, he may add: ‘I rather fancy you, in fact.’

If he wants to marry a girl, he says:

‘I say . . . would you? . . .’

If he wants to make an indecent proposal:

‘I say . . . what about . . .?’ (Mikes 1961, 24-25.)

‘Overstatement, too, plays a considerable part in English social life. This takes mostly the form of someone remarking: ‘I say . . .’ and then keeping silent for three days on end.’ (Mikes 1961, 25.)

I think Mikes’s examples are brilliant, and so English.

2.6.2 Self-deprecation

self-deprecating

adj. (written) done in a way that makes you own achievements or abilities seem unimportant: *He gave a self-deprecating shrug.* **self-deprecation** *noun* (Hornby 2003, 1160.)

English self-deprecation can be seen as a kind of irony. It involves saying the opposite of what you mean – or the opposite of what you intend people to understand. The English are not naturally any more modest than other nations, but they have rules on modesty. The modesty displayed by the English is generally false – or, ironic. (Fox 2005, 68.)

‘To show how it works, however, I will take a relatively blatant example. My fiancé is a brain surgeon. When we first met, I asked what had led him to choose this profession. ‘Well, um,’ he replied, ‘I read PPE [Philosophy, Politics and Economics] at Oxford, but I found it all rather beyond me, so, er, I thought I’d better do something a bit less difficult.’ I laughed, but then, as he must have expected, protested that surely brain surgery could not really be described as an easy option. This gave him a further opportunity for self-deprecation. ‘Oh no, it’s nowhere near as clever as it’s cracked up to be; to be honest it’s actually a bit hit-or-miss. It’s just plumbing, really, plumbing with a microscope – except plumbing’s rather more accurate.’ It later emerged, as he must have known it would, that far from finding the intellectual demands of Oxford ‘beyond him’, he had entered with a scholarship and graduated with a First. ‘I was a dreadful little swot,’ he explained.’ (Fox 2005, 69.)

Among the English themselves, self-deprecation works perfectly well – everyone understands that it means roughly the opposite of what is said, and is impressed both by one’s achievements and by one’s reluctance to trumpet them. (Fox 2005, 69-70.)

But when the English try to play this game with people from other cultures, the problems arise. As according to Fox, these foreigners ‘do not understand the rules, fail to appreciate the irony, and therefore have an unfortunate tendency to take our self-deprecating statements at face value’. The English make their customary modest noises and the foreigners accept the apparently low estimate of their achievements, and are unimpressed. But the English cannot just turn round and say what they would want to: ‘No, hey, wait a minute, you’re supposed to give me a sort of knowingly sceptical smile, showing that you realise I’m being humorously self-deprecating, don’t believe a word of it and think even more highly of my abilities and my modesty’. The foreigners do not know that the English are playing a convoluted bluffing game. The foreigners inadvertently call their bluff, and the whole thing backfires on the English. (Fox 2005, 70.)

Self-deprecation is such a lovely English way of communicating. But it really may be difficult for a foreigner to understand, with both parties ending up feeling a little awkward.

2.7 Humour and Class

English humour is classless. No matter what class you belong to, breaches are noticed, frowned upon and ridiculed. (Fox 2005, 71.)

I was relieved to learn this. I was afraid that humour would be different according to the social class you belong to, so that there would not be a sort of ‘united’ Englishness with regard to humour. Of course, there are exceptions, and they are those that prove the rules.

The rules of English humour may be classless, but a great deal of everyday English humour is about social classes. As the English are obsessed with classes, this is not a surprise, especially when they make everything a subject for humour. They are ‘always laughing at class-related habits and foibles, mocking the aspirations and embarrassing mistakes of social climbers, and poking gentle fun at the class system’. (Fox 2005, 72.)

2.7.1 Vocabulary

The vocabulary you use will tell much about your social class. Breaches of vocabulary may tell you are a social climber. Using the first two words mentioned here is regarded as a deadly sin. However, class-related vocabulary may also be used as a means of humour. (Fox 2005, 73.)

‘Toilet’

‘Toilet’ is a word that makes the upper classes flinch – the correct upper-middle / upper term is ‘loo’ or ‘lavatory’. ‘Bog’ is sometimes acceptable, but only if it is said in an obviously ironic-jocular manner, as though in quotes. The same word may be sometimes used by the working classes, but without the ironic quotation marks. (Fox 2005, 76-77.)

Some lower- and middle-middles with pretensions or aspirations may use suburban-genteel euphemisms such as ‘gents’, ‘ladies’, ‘bathroom’, ‘powder room’, ‘facilities’ and ‘convenience’ instead of ‘toilet’. Or they may use jokey euphemisms such as ‘latrines’, ‘heads’ and ‘privy’, females tending to use the former, males the latter. (Fox 2005, 76-77.)

‘Settee’

If people are calling an upholstered seat for two or more people a settee or a couch, they are no higher than middle-middle. If they call it a sofa, they are upper-middle or above. Some younger upper-middles, who are unlikely to use the word ‘settee’, may do so as a joke or to annoy their class-anxious parents. (Fox 2005, 78.)

‘Smart’ and ‘posh’

In addition to the ‘seven deadly sins’ mentioned by Kate Fox that are the most reliable class indicators, there are a number of other terms that will also register on the highly sensitive class-radar devices of the English. The word ‘posh’ is one of them. The correct upper-class word is ‘smart’ – in upper-middle and upper-class circles, ‘posh’ can only be used ironically, in a jokey tone of voice to show that you know it is a low-class word. (Fox 2005, 79.)

2.7.2 The Brag-wall rule

The English do not boast – not directly, at least. You may have won prestigious awards or may have pictures of yourself shaking hands with a celebrity. It tells a great deal about your social status, depending on where you place these items in your home.

Placing these items in your sitting room or entrance hall, where your guest will no doubt see them, you are middle-middle class or below. However, for the upper-middles and above, there is only one place for these items that is acceptable; the downstairs loo. Your guests are likely to use it at some point, and of course they will be impressed by your achievements. Boasting and taking oneself too seriously are against all the rules of Englishness. By displaying your awards in your loo you are making a joke out of them, and cannot be accused of breaking these rules. This trick is smart, in both senses of the word (posh and clever). (Fox 2005, 117.)

2.7.3 The Ironic-gnome Rule

Kate Fox tells about a person whom she met during her research, or actually, about his garden. She was somewhat surprised to see a garden gnome in this upper-middle-class garden. According to the owner, the gnome was ‘ironic’. She wondered how one could tell that this gnome was supposed to be an ironic statement and not just any gnome. He rather sniffily replied that one should just have a look at the rest of the garden, and it would be obvious that the gnome was a tongue-in-cheek joke. (Fox 2005, 132.)

At this point Fox thought that garden gnomes are always something of a joke, in any garden. But he thought that ‘while the lower classes saw gnomes as intrinsically amusing, his gnome was amusing only because of its incongruous appearance in a ‘smart’ garden.’ It was a joke about class. (Fox 2005, 132-133.)

The man’s reaction to Fox’s questions clearly defined him as upper-middle, rather than upper class. His pointing out that the gnome was ‘ironic’ already demoted him by half a class from Fox’s original assessment. A genuine member of the upper classes would either have admitted to a passion for garden gnomes or said something like ‘Ah yes, my gnome. I’m very fond of my gnome.’ and left her to draw her own conclusions. According to Fox, the upper classes do not care what people think of them, and in any case do not need ironic gnomes to emphasise their status. (Fox 2005, 133.)

2.7.4 Foreigners and Class

But what about foreigners, then? I have heard before that foreigners do not belong to any class, but still kept wondering if this was really true, and if the social classes only consider the English.

Mikes confirms my thoughts by saying that a foreigner does not belong to any class, simply because he is a foreigner. Because he was one himself, people talked to him in a freer and more unreserved fashion than to English-born people; they were always prepared to be more communicative and open-hearted to him than to one of their fellow English, because it did not really matter what he knew and thought of them. (Mikes 1958, 44.)

Of course, class distinctions are all about Englishness, so I am certain it does not really consider foreigners. But how are foreigners defined if they use certain words, possibly mixing both lower- and upper-class words? This remains a mystery to me.

2.8 Humour and Home

In this chapter I will handle some rules concerning the English home.

2.8.1 Improvement-talk Rules

When showing visitors the results of your DIY efforts, or talking about your home-improvements at a party or in the pub, a strict modesty rule applies. Even if you are highly skilled, you must always play down your achievements, and if possible play up your most embarrassing mistakes and blunders. (Fox 2005, 122.)

These, according to Fox, are the basic rules of improvement-talk. The talk can sometimes engage in competitive self-deprecation and sounds like this:

I managed to burst three pipes just laying the carpet! 'We bought an expensive carpet, but I ruined it by cutting it four inches short, so I had to build some bookcases to cover the gap.' 'I somehow managed to put the sink in the wrong way round – and I'd done all the tiles before I noticed.' 'You think that's bad: it took me an hour and three cups of tea to put up a coat-hook board, and then I found I'd hung it upside-down!' 'So I painted over the dodgy bit and tried to pretend it was meant to look like that, but my girlfriend was like, 'You complete muppet!'" (Fox 2005, 122.)

All these examples are just to show to what extremes this talk may go. I think can be very easily exaggerated. But I do not care, it is so amusing.

According to Fox:

--- the improvement-talk rules highlight an extreme version of the generic modesty rule, involving an exercise in competitive modesty that can only be described as 'one-downmanship'. Other nations have rituals of polite modesty and self-deprecation ---, but the English improvement-talk one-downmanship is distinctive for the importance of *humour*: it is not enough merely to speak disparagingly of one's incompetent DIY efforts --- one must do so in a witty and amusing manner. (Fox 2005, 135.)

2.8.2 The Awful Estate Agent Rule

As probably most people anywhere else on the planet, the English have a dislike for estate agents. To put it shortly, the English sense of privacy is offended when an estate agent steps in somebody's home and shows it around to complete strangers. This is why estate agents are regarded as 'an intrusive threat' to the English sense of identity, so people 'neutralise' their power by making fun of them. (Fox 2005, 135.)

This is actually 'a universal human coping mechanism: in all cultures, people who are perceived to be threatening tend to be the subject of such defensive jokes'. The English use humour 'to deal not only with threatening or unfamiliar matters but with any social or practical difficulty, from the most trivial problems to issues of national importance.' (Fox 2005, 135-136.)

2.9 Pub-talk

Home may be an Englishman's castle, but Fox suggests that home is what the English have instead of social skills. (Fox 2005, 134.) But as I think the pub is the second home to the English, I placed this title under 'Humour and Home'

In the pub, apparently, the English have social skills. It is the place where the whole village gathers to enjoy a drink. But like in every other aspect of English life, there are rules of pub-behaviour; nevertheless, pub rules really are different from other rules of Englishness.

2.9.1 Pub Regulars

Pub regulars are people who visit their regular pub very often. These people may have known each other for years, regard each other as mates, but not necessarily as close friends. They very often call each other by ironic nicknames; for example, a very short person may be known as Lofty. (Fox 2005, 99.)

Regulars also greet each other in humorous and ironic ways, such as ‘Ah, just in time to buy your round, Bill!’ or ‘Back again, Doc? Haven’t you got a home to go to?’ (Fox 2005, 99.)

According to Fox, every pub has its own private code of in-jokes, nicknames, phrases and gestures. In pub-talk, there is a constant undercurrent of humour, wit, and linguistic inventiveness. (Fox 2005, 100-101.)

2.9.2 Buying a Drink

In a pub, when you are waiting your turn to buy a drink, you do not attract the attention of the publican; you just wait patiently. Kate Fox calls this the ‘pantomime rule’. Although the pub is probably the only place where the English do not form a queue, the publican will know exactly who the next in line is. However, among pub regulars, this rule is different.

Regulars are allowed to make ironic remarks such as ‘Oi, Spadge, when you’ve quite finished your little chat, I wouldn’t mind another pint, if it’s not too much bloody trouble!’ Such ironic banter, backchat and mock-insults are a standard feature of conversations between regulars and bar staff, and among fellow regulars. (Fox 2005, 102.)

In anywhere else than a pub, this kind of talk would be regarded as very, very rude – but quite normal in the social micro-climate of the pub.

Wry humour about life’s tragedies and dysfunctions are normal in pub-talk (as probably in any other English talk); one may joke about one’s divorce, depression, illness and other private difficulties and problems; but earnest heart-to-heart outpourings are frowned upon, except, of course, between close friends or couples. (Fox 2005, 106.)

Like in any other sort of English communication, there is always an undercurrent of humour in pub-talk, along with a sharp wit and linguistic inventiveness. (Fox 2005, 107.)

2.10 Humour at Work

According to Fox, every English workplace is the same when it comes to humour. Like in most English communication, one of the most striking features in English working life is the undercurrent of humour. But it is not about thigh-slapping jokes or being good-humoured in the sense of happy or cheerful. It is about the subtle forms of humour, such as wit, irony, and understatement. (Fox 2005, 179.)

If you are English and spend your days in an office, for example, you may not even notice this. But if you are a foreigner, you will certainly notice it. Or, rather, you may notice something, but not necessarily identify it as humour. According to Fox, the English sense of humour is in fact what causes most misunderstandings at work. In many countries, taking oneself too seriously may be considered a fault. In England, however, it is a sin. (Fox 2005, 179.)

2.10.1 Irony and Understatement Rules

The English irony in business is only worse than the 'normal' irony. The English fail to seem enthusiastic about their work or products, making remarks such as 'Well, it's not bad, considering' or 'You could do a lot worse'. This is the English way of trying to convince customers that their loft conversions or whatever are the best money can buy. (Fox 2005, 181.)

The English have a tendency to say 'Well, I expect we'll manage somehow,' when they mean 'Yes, certainly, no trouble', or 'That would be quite helpful,' when they mean 'For Christ's sake, that should have been done yesterday!' When there has been a complete and utter disaster, they say 'We seem to have a bit of a problem', and 'That all went rather well, don't you think?' after a catastrophic meeting where a million-pound deal has fallen through. (Fox 2005, 181.)

It may take foreign colleagues and clients a while to realise what the English really mean when they say 'Oh *really?* How interesting!' It may mean 'I don't believe a word of it, you lying toad.' Or, it may mean 'I'm bored and not really listening but trying to be polite.' Or they may really be surprised and interested. You'll never know. Even the English themselves, who have a fairly good 'sixth sense' for detecting irony, cannot always be entirely sure. (Fox 2005, 181-182.)

English humour may be difficult to understand, but it is even more so at work and in business.

2.10.2 Moaning Rules

The English moan a lot. And it is not just any moaning; there are different types of it. There is nothing the English love more than a good moan; it is also a pleasure to watch. (Fox 2005, 405.)

The principal rule is that work is something to be moaned about. If you do not indulge in the customary convivial moaning about work, there is a danger that you will be seen as too keen and earnest, and labelled as a ‘sad geek’, a sycophantic ‘suck’ or a self-important ‘pompous git’. (Fox 2005, 197.)

The Monday-morning Moan

According to Fox, English work-moaning is a highly predictable, regular, choreographed ritual. On Monday mornings, in every workplace in England, someone will be conducting a Monday-morning moan. ‘It is universally understood that everyone hates Mondays; that we all had trouble dragging ourselves out of bed; that we really could have done with an extra day to get over the weekend; that the traffic/tube/trains/buses just seem to be getting worse and worse; that we have far too much to do this week, as per bloody usual; that we are already tired and our back/head/feet are hurting, and the week’s only just started, for God’s sake; and, look, now the photocopier is on the blink again, just for a change, huh, typical!’ (Fox 2005, 197.)

There are endless variations on this Monday-morning-moan – no two such moans are ever exactly alike, however, they are remarkably similar. At the end of the first morning-moan ritual, someone may close the proceedings with ‘*And it’s still raining,*’ This is the cue for everyone to shift from their habitual moan-position and start reluctantly getting on with the day’s work, until the next moaning opportunity. (Fox 2005, 197-198.)

The Time-moan and the Meeting-moan

According to Fox, there are variations in the English workplace moans, but even these are largely predictable – for example that everyone moans about time. However, junior and low-

grade employees are more likely to complain that time passes too slowly, and that they are bored and cannot wait to get home, while more senior people usually whine that time just seems to fly past, that they never have enough of it to get through their ridiculous workload, and now there's another meeting they have to go to. (Fox 2005, 198.)

All white-collar executives and managers moan about meetings. To admit to enjoying meetings, or even finding them useful, just is not done. Meetings are by definition pointless, boring and awful. So we have to moan about them. (Fox 2005, 198-199.)

The Mock-moaning Rule

The curious thing about all of the moaning is that the tone is actually quite cheerful, good-natured, and, above all, humorous. This is in fact one of the most important rules of moaning. However genuinely grumpy you may feel, it must be disguised as mock-grumpiness. (Fox 2005, 199.)

Ritual moaning in the workplace is a form of social bonding – it is an opportunity to establish and reinforce common values. In all English moaning rituals, there is a tacit understanding that nothing can or will be done about the problems that are moaned about. The English just want to enjoy moaning about them. This ritual moaning is purely therapeutic. (Fox 2005, 199.)

I find all these different types of moaning very fascinating. Complaining can actually be about humour and social bonding.

2.11 Humour in Public Transport

According to Hall, there is an adequate network of railway lines in Britain. However, many trains are outdated and dirty, and in some areas they are always late. (Hall 1996, 126.)

Year after year, the English may commute to work with the same people every morning. They recognise each other but do not greet them, as this might lead to actually talking to them, every morning! So the English just prefer to think the other people in the train simply do not exist. And that they themselves do not exist. This is what Fox calls 'The Denial Rule'. Simple, really, so you do not need to talk to anyone. So, the English trains are usually very silent, although there are some exceptions to this rule. (Fox 2005, 139-141.)

This makes sense, really, but at first I just could not believe this. I have always thought the English to be happy, friendly and polite (which they are, of course), but I would have thought they would talk to each other more. But I think it is the English privacy.

2.11.1 The Information Exception

According to Fox, you may break the denial rule with the ‘information exception’, to ask for vital information, such as ‘Is this the right train for Paddington?’ or ‘Does this one stop at Reading?’ Responses to such questions may often be mildly humorous, such as ‘Well, I certainly hope so!’ or ‘If it’s not, I’m in trouble!’ When Fox asked someone: ‘Is this the fast train to London?’ (meaning the direct train, as opposed to the ‘stopping’ train that calls at lots of small stations), some Eeyorish wit is sure to respond with ‘Well, depends what you mean by ‘fast’ . . .’ The more humorous responses can sometimes indicate a greater willingness to exchange at least a few more words – particularly if one can subtly engineer the conversation towards the ‘moan exception’ category. (Fox 2005, 141-142.)

2.11.2 The Moan Exception

Hall says that station staff always announces the reason for the delay of a train by saying, for example, ‘This is due to signalling problems.’ She continues: ‘Reasons for delays have also included ‘leaves on the line’ and ‘the wrong type of snow’. You will hear British people making sarcastic comments if the train is late yet again.’ (Hall 1996, 126.)

Kate Fox tells more about this below, however, in much more detail and amusing comments.

The English like to moan a lot. Moaning can be humorous, witty, and also very enjoyable. The ‘moan exception’, according to Fox, usually occurs when something goes wrong – the train is delayed or stops in the middle of nowhere for no apparent reason, for example. On an occasion such as these, the English suddenly become aware of each other; they make eye contact, sigh noisily and exchange long-suffering smiles. You can always hear someone say ‘Huh, *typical!*’ or ‘For Christ’s sake, what is it *this* time?’ (Fox 2005, 142.)

Nowadays, according to Fox, someone is always very likely to comment on ‘the wrong sort of leaves’. This, according to her, is ‘a reference to a now legendary excuse offered by the railway operators when ‘leaves on the track’ caused extensive disruption to a large part of the railway system’. When somebody told them that ‘fallen leaves were a perfectly normal feature of

autumn and had never before brought the railways to a halt, they responded plaintively that these were ‘the wrong sort of leaves’. Ever since, this remark has been a standing joke. ‘- - - if the loudspeaker announcement blames snow for the delay, someone will invariably say: ‘The wrong sort of snow, I suppose!’ Fox tells an amusing story about once waiting for a train at her local station in Oxford, when the loudspeaker announced a delay due to ‘a cow on the line outside Banbury’, which is actually very common. However, three people on the platform had been influenced by the remark on the fallen leaves, as they simultaneously piped up: ‘The wrong sort of cow!’ (Fox 2005, 142-143.)

2.12 Humour and Foreigners

According to Ronowicz, people do not usually realise how much their daily lives are influenced by unwritten rules that are automatically accepted within their social class and their whole country. They take them for granted and thereby assume that the same cultural rules apply to everyone. It is not until they come across another culture in one way or another that they realise having problems understanding the foreign culture. Living abroad for a longer period may cause stress and lead to a culture shock. (Ronowicz & Yallop 1999, 8.)

According to Ronowicz (1999, in Brick, 1991), culture shock is the result of the removal of the familiar. When a person is faced with every-day things in an unfamiliar environment and unknown rules, he or she may have symptoms such as fatigue and impatience, or, in the worst case, develop negative stereotypes of the host culture, withdraw from contact with host-country nationals and refuse to learn the language. (Ronowicz & Yallop 1999, 10.)

According to Haigh, British people (that is, not only the English) often prefer to express themselves ‘in deliberately ambiguous, vague, ironic, understated or humorous ways’. They often use humour in business meetings for a specific purpose, for example to break tension, to speed up a discussion, to introduce a new idea in a semi-serious manner, or to criticise someone indirectly. This may very well be the case, but I think the English use their humour constantly, and most of the time they may not even realise it. Haigh also claims that ironic or ambiguous language may contain hidden criticism (e.g. ‘we’re not quite with you on that’ may mean ‘we disagree completely’). I think the irony the English use is just a natural part of their speech and communication. (Haigh 2004, 30.)

Haigh also says that euphemisms are commonly used in Britain, mostly to hide the truth, or 'to be economical with the truth' of a matter, or for humorous purposes, as he puts it. (Haigh 2004, 30-31.)

International situations in working life include meetings and negotiations. One's communication skills are tested; in addition to language skills and the relationship and negotiation skills one has learned, one should have cultural knowledge. We may have to concentrate on things that we normally regard as simple, such as greeting or courtesy. What you normally take for granted may become a problem in a different culture. It may be difficult to know what one appreciates, and then even try to understand it yourself. (Salminen & Poutanen 1996, 7-8.)

Foreigners may find it very difficult to understand English humour and the whole English culture. Therefore they should get to know the culture well in advance.

2.13 Humour and Englishness

According to Fox, the English do not have any sort of global monopoly on humour (I think they do), but what is distinctive is the pervasiveness and supreme importance of it in English everyday life and culture. In English communication, there is always an undercurrent of humour. Humour is the English 'default mode'; they cannot function without it, it is a reflex. 'When in doubt, joke.' (Fox 2005, 402.)

As Kate Fox puts it: 'So, without wanting to blow our own trumpet or come over all patriotic, I think we can safely say that our skills in the arts of irony, understatement and self-mockery are, on the whole, not bad.' (Fox 2005, 72.)

3 Collecting and Analysing Empirical Data

My empirical material consists of interviews, email conversation and personal observation. I made four interviews at Bellcrest Translations Ltd, and I have also used my email conversations with a Bellcrest employee as source material. I have also done personal observation while studying the interviews and email messages.

3.1 Collecting Methods of the Data

In the next chapters I will handle the collection methods of the data, that is, how I made the interviews and the email conversations.

3.1.1 Interviews and Personal Observation

Interviews are usually considered the main research method in a qualitative research. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2007, 200.)

I chose to do interviews for my research because I was not quite sure where my questions and the answers to them would lead. I also wanted to do interviews because that would provide the possibility to specify my questions and the answers given, if required, and seizing other interesting things emerging from the answers.

The type of interview I used was a theme interview, but which became very close to an open interview. I had prepared certain questions in advance, but the conversation would sometimes start to meander, and that was what I had actually hoped for; to get a larger picture about the things I asked about; not merely short, simplified answers. Some of my informants were very talkative, some were less. I did not make any test interviews.

I made the interviews during the spring and summer 2007. Altogether, I interviewed four people separately, three of whom are Finnish and one is English. I have not mentioned the interviewees' names here. I made the interviews for another purpose, for a thesis about the cultural differences between Finnish and English people, as it was then going to be. After this I realised that I wanted to study more Englishness in my thesis, and chose a subject that is very important to me: English humour. Because I had material on both Englishness and Finnishness, I decided to use it for this subject.

As I was then going to study the above-mentioned cultural differences, I chose my informants on the basis of their cross-cultural experiences. The three Finns that I interviewed had earlier lived or were at the time living in England, and the one English person was living in Finland.

My interview questions were mainly about adapting to Finnish or English culture. I asked my informants what they knew about the country before they went there, what their presumptions were about the country and its people, and how they were prepared for going there. I also asked what they knew and thought about the country and its people after they had come back or after they had been living there for a while. I also asked questions about the behaviour of the people, about situations of getting to know new people, and about any oddities and humour of the culture.

3.1.2 Email Conversation and Personal Observation

When I worked for Bellcrest Translations Ltd, I used to email with one of our English language editors who at that time lived in Finland. Again, I have not mentioned her name here. We talked much about work-related matters, but also very much about other things. She agreed that I could use our email conversations as material for my thesis. I am going to look for signs and elements of English types of humour in these conversations. The conversations are from the spring and summer 2007.

3.2 Analysing Methods of the Data

In the next two chapters I will tell about how I analysed the interviews and the email conversations.

3.2.1 Interviews and Personal Observation

I typed out the interviews and studied them carefully to find anything with regard to English sense of humour. I first made some notes on each of them, then wrote more about them and finally put the information together.

According to the book ‘Tutki ja kirjoita’, questionnaires and interviews are ways to find out what people think, feel and believe. They will tell us, what the people observe, and what is happening around them. However, they do not tell us what is really happening. (Hirsjärvi etc. 2007, 207.)

3.2.2 Email Conversation and Personal Observation

I printed and studied the email conversations carefully to find any significantly English features of humour. First I made notes of the conversations, then wrote more about them, and finally put the information together.

4 Results of the Empirical Data

4.1 Interviews

The interviews I made were for the subject of the cultural differences between the English and the Finnish, and would have proved very useful for it. But as I did not have very much time for background research before the interviews, it was only after having made them that I chose to change the subject. However, I think I received some very valuable information on Englishness and English humour.

In the next chapters I will tell what the interviews and email conversations revealed about the English and the English sense of humour.

4.1.1 First Interview

My first interviewee is a language editor and a subcontractor for Bellcrest Translations Ltd; he is an Englishman who has now lived in Finland for about ten years with his Finnish wife. Originally he is from the Isle of Wight.

This English informant told me that English culture is all about social classes, and that it is the most important thing about the culture. He also told that what he really loves about Finland is that there are no social classes here; everyone is equal.

We also talked about Finnish and English people and internationalisation. My informant said that he could not recognise any specifically English features anymore. The world is changing, people come and go, and they are losing their identity. He has seen this happen in England, and does not want it to happen in Finland, too. He thinks it is 'terribly important' to remain one's identity.

Surprisingly, I found his speech very English, in the way I have understood English speech usually is; humorous, ironic, and sometimes moaning. My breakthrough with his interview was, as I have interpreted it, self-deprecation:

What have I studied... I've studied psychology and sociology in the university and then I was a policeman and then I got very tired of that, so I then took some more courses in editing and so on and I became a freelance editor of books and I worked for different publishing houses and I edited mainly university text books on psychiatry and psychology and all sorts of things like that.

I think this is obviously self-deprecation, really. What an achievement; he has studied and worked and then studied some more. He must have gone through hard work and stress, and is now being very modest about it. Very English, I think.

As he now lives in a small Finnish town where everyone is frightened of a person who speaks English, my informant is not very happy with regard to this. He says ‘Well, it gets you down a bit.’ I may very well be wrong, but I think this could be both earnestness and an understatement. Earnestness, according to Kate Fox, is not an English feature in casual conversation, but I think it may be different here because this was an interview and honest answers were what I wanted. Also, I think ‘a bit’ here might mean ‘very much’ – a typical English understatement.

4.1.2 Second Interview

My second interviewee is a translator at Bellcrest Translations Ltd, who worked at a hotel in London for six months some years ago. At that time he studied translating at the University of Helsinki, in Kouvola.

Some time before he went to England, he had lived in Germany for about a year. This made his culture shock in England less severe. He also thinks the degree of a culture shock depends much on the person and whether you leave someone behind that you will really miss.

My informant told me there were ‘playful arguments’ at workplaces. You show your emotions, say cruel and bad things, but smile afterwards. This was different from things in Finland and was very difficult to get used to. He also told that the English have their own sense of humour, and that a Finn could get easily hurt by it. According to him, the English are quite straightforward in what they say, but most of them are very friendly and easy to approach.

Before he left for England, the interviewee had ‘a sort of respect for the English mixed with fear’, as he said. Afterwards, he thinks class differences are a visible thing in England. He also thinks the English are proud of themselves. I understand this to mean the same thing that my third informant told me; that the English are proud of themselves and do not care what anyone else thinks about them.

There were many kinds of different people at the hotel, working and as guests. And their humour was different from what my informant was used to. The jokes and things they said were meant, according to him, as a ‘Can you bear this joke?’ kind of thing.

According to my interviewee, people complain about everything; about the government and everything that is going on. Mostly they are half-joking. But the English do moan all the time, and it is part of their humour.

4.1.3 Third Interview

My third interviewee is a Finn who has lived in Leeds for some years, but as far as I know, he has now moved back to Finland. He is a translator and a dancer, and a subcontractor for Bellcrest Translations Ltd.

Before he left for England, my interviewee thought the English to be very civilised and dignified. Now he thinks one of the main differences between the Finnish and the English is that the English are proud of their being English and satisfied with themselves, and do not care what the rest of the world thinks about them. They are completely satisfied with their own island and with being there. He also thinks the English are very polite.

According to my interviewee, the English joke a lot, but sex and nudity are taboos that are not joked about. Their comedy is great, but it is part of their mentality; they have lots of things they can make fun of. They also have many stand-up comedians, which, according to him, is one of the best things in England.

4.1.4 Fourth Interview

My fourth interviewee is a translator at Bellcrest Translations Ltd, and he has lived most of his life in different countries, such as Indonesia, Nigeria and Australia. He studied French and translating in Manchester some years ago.

Before he moved to England, my interviewee thought that the English were happy and funny people, and that they appreciated jokes and funny things. Afterwards, he thinks the English are somewhat more polite than the Finnish. They say small, polite things to make each other’s lives easier and nicer. He also tells there are many things you just have to learn; for example what you think is a question could just be a greeting.

My interviewee told that nicknames are used quite much. He told about an English friend of his who constantly used the phrase 'I'm not trying to be funny here, but...' He thought this was a funny character of his friend's personality. Why this friend of his used this phrase remains a mystery to me. Was he actually trying to be funny, but not admitting it?

4.2 Email Conversation and Personal Observation

In this chapter I will handle the email conversations between my English informant, a language editor at Bellcrest Translations Ltd, and myself. The conversations are from the spring and summer 2007 and consider both work-related and other matters.

It would have been good to have some more material to study. I was also going to interview this informant, but unfortunately I ran out of time. I could not identify any specific rules of Englishness described by Kate Fox in these messages, such as understatement, for example.

However, I think my informant writes in a very English way; there is always an undercurrent of humour in her speech. She is also very cheerful: 'Have a good day, spring is here (just ignore the clouds and rain)!'

Once, when I complained to her about the weather, she said: 'Trust me, nobody can complain about the weather as much as an English person!' The English do complain and moan about all sorts of things.

She said: 'English people are generally more polite and have 'good manners'. Not just in comparison to Finns but to any other nationality. It's not something we are particularly proud of and it isn't something we strive for, it's just something that is born into us.' I agree with her; the English politeness just comes naturally.

I think you could call this serious humour, as it is a serious matter: 'The snowman, may the Lord rest his soul, is now lying on his side, headless and limbless, and serving as a dog jump/pee post! There's just no dignity in death for snowmen.'

These are some examples of the funny and humorous things my informant said in her email messages. I think there is a constant, English undercurrent of humour in her speech.

5 Conclusion of All the Data

Finally, I have drawn a conclusion of all the gathered information. Here are my answers to the questions I have put in the beginning of this research. First, I will answer my sub questions, and finally my main question.

How often/much does humour appear in English everyday life?

Humour appears very much in English everyday life, because the English use it all the time, no matter when or where. There is always an undercurrent of humour in all English communication.

In what kinds of situations do the English use humour?

In English communication, there is no special time or place for humour, as there are in many other cultures. There is always an undercurrent of humour in English communication. So, I would say, they use it in every situation, in one way or another.

Do the English use humour consciously?

I think it depends on the situation. I think the English mostly do not even realise they are making, for example, an understatement. It just comes naturally.

What types of English humour are there?

There are various types of humour; irony, understatement, self-deprecation, even moaning. These are all subtle types of humour.

Do social classes have an impact on the English use of humour?

The basic principles of humour are classless, but class differences are often made fun of.

What is the role of humour in adapting to the English culture?

How important is it?

If you move to England to study or to work, or if you meet or work with English people, it is very important to understand English people and their culture, and especially their use of language and humour.

It is difficult to adapt to English culture if you cannot communicate with the English and do not understand the hidden, unspoken rules of the English behaviour. You have to know what you can or cannot say in certain situations, and how to behave in them.

If you are moving abroad, you should study the culture as much as possible in advance. This will give you better knowledge of what you are going to face in the new culture, and what to expect. In the best case, you will totally avoid culture shock.

Humour is a very important part of English life. English sense of humour may sometimes be difficult for foreigners to understand. This is a major part of working life – if you fail to understand the English expression of irony, for example, you may find it difficult to communicate with the English, and fail to understand what they really mean.

English sense of humour is very important for a foreigner to understand and appreciate. If you do, you will succeed. The English have a special sixth sense of detecting irony.

How does humour appear in English everyday life?

Finally, the answers to my main problem.

Humour in English everyday life may appear in different ways; it may be irony, understatement, or self-deprecation, for example. It can appear in any situation; on a train, at work, in a shop, or on the street.

Humour is an extremely important part of English everyday life and communication. While in most other cultures there is a specific time and place for humour, in English communication, there is always an undercurrent of humour.

6 Discussion

This is discussion about how I did the research, what I learned from it, and how I found the subject.

6.1 What I Have Done

I studied several books about English and British culture for this research. My main source, 'Watching the English', proved to be extremely useful, as it told not only about the rules of Englishness in general, but also about the rules of English humour.

I made four interviews at Bellcrest Translations Ltd, which I have now analysed. Had I had more time in the beginning of my research, I would have placed my questions differently, and the answers would have probably been more useful for this subject. If I had stayed in my original subject, the interviews would have been extremely useful, but I found this subject so much more interesting. I also analysed some email conversations, trying to find out about English humour.

Because I worked too much and could not devote myself to this research, it took me nearly two years to finish it. But finally, I have now studied all my material and drawn my conclusions of it.

6.2 What I Have Learned

While writing this thesis I have learnt very, very much about English humour and about the whole English culture. Humour is just part of English culture, but a very important one.

I have also learned much about doing a research; how to do it and how not to do it. It requires lots of time, effort, and devotion. I am a person who cannot work and study at the same time; I have learned that this applies to doing a research, as well.

6.3 Purpose

I wrote this thesis for Bellcrest Translations Ltd. My purpose was to find out about the English sense of humour, and how it is used in everyday life.

I hope this thesis to be useful to anyone who has to understand the English to survive – at work, studying or otherwise living in England – or just out of curiosity and pure interest.

6.4 How I Found the Subject

As I had not done a research like this earlier, any subject would have felt difficult for me. But as I gradually studied the material and finally changed the subject to English humour, I became truly enthusiastic. English culture in general, and especially English humour, is so fascinating. I am very happy I was given a chance to do this research. I have been under a lot of stress during the research, but it has certainly been worth it.

6.5 Evaluation

According to my own standards, I managed to find out about English humour rather well. Or, to put it in a more English way, not very badly.

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