British Humour as the Art of Contemporary *Homo Ridens*: Based on an Exploration of the Comedy Series *Fawlty Towers*

Agata Figiel, *PhD Student*
Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław, Poland
satisfcation@gmail.com

Abstract: Humour may ridicule both − the old and the new: something that is old may be attacked from a new position, and equally, something that is new, modern, dangerous for the status quo. The weapon in such confrontations, since the beginning of time, has been laughter. During primitive folk ceremonies or ancient peoples' rites – from the beginning of humour – one function was supreme, the elimination through ridicule of all elements of social life that may threaten a given society or the harmonious whole or particular groups, or units. The sample of linguistic analysis of incongruity and superiority, from an episode of the comedy series *Fawlty Towers*, has been used throughout this paper[1]. The conclusion makes it clear that the aim of humour was and still is to ridicule certain attitudes or forms of behaviour, which since early ages have sought to object to or overthrow established rules.

Keywords: humour, theory of humour, irony, incongruity, superiority, British humour, *Fawlty Towers*.

1. Background to Concepts of Humour

Humour is regarded as a natural feature of the human mind; nevertheless it should be understood against its milieu, its époque, and with reference to other human dimensions. Laughter though, is not only an element of physical and sensual cheerfulness but also a child of intellectual reflection. Deliberations on the nature and role of humour were long ago spun by early philosophers and are the subject of interest not only for philosophers nowadays but also for literary researchers, artists, psychologists and sociologists. Therefore, one may see so many orientations in recent research and more and more often such explorations are evolving into interdisciplinary branches. Currently, in science, theories of humour are usually divided into three main groups: the psychoanalytical (relaxation theories represented by Spencer (1911), Darwin (1872), Estman (1936) and Freud (1974)), socio-behavioural (humour connected with degradation and aggression; the theories from Aristotle [384 BC–322 BC], through Hobbes (1651) and Bain (1859) and cognitive-perceptual (incongruity theories with their thinkers, like: Bergson(1902), Kant (1908), and Spencer (1919)

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The term humour is understood by contemporary psychological theories as a specific, objective group of features of an outside object (Trzynadlowski, 1952, p. 75). A basic, structural characteristic of every, potentially comical stimulus is incongruity, called incompatibility, disagreement or incoherence, too (Shultz, 1972, pp. 456–477). It is comprehended as a simultaneous or almost simultaneous occurrence of a situation containing unrelated, non-participatory, mutually exclusive elements in a given context. It concerns, therefore, the lack of fit between the cognitive structure of the subject (the expectations towards an object formed on the basis of their current contacts) and the stimulation reaching this structure.

2. Incongruity

Incongruity theory states that humour draws on a dissonance between something one expects and something one is confronted with. The formulation of this theory is attributed to the Irish-born Scottish philosopher, Francis Hutcheson [1694−1747] as an answer to the theory of Thomas Hobbes [1588−1679]. Hutcheson's theory described a collision of opposite ideas and linking incoherent elements in one (Chłopicki, 1995, pp. 8−9). One of the first thinkers to declare on the subject of incongruity, which became regarded as the cause of laughter, was Immanuel Kant [1724−1804], who identified wit with resonance and comparison in his theory of contrast. The comparative punch finds its pleasure in discovering similarities between heterogeneous objects, while at the same time delivering material to the reason so that it is able to generate general terms. Nevertheless, humour theoreticians, express reservations about the Kantian conception because, first of all, it is too broad. In his Critique of Judgment ([1790] 1987, p. 203), he states that: "Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing." After that one may have a feeling of relief and relaxation but it does not, necessarily, have to have something to do with humour. Secondly, Kant's formula of humour is too narrow, at the same time. There are examples of punches, where there does not appear any transformation of tense expectations but, what is more, there are no expectations at all.

Similar views to the ones of Kant's were shared by Herbert Spencer (1919, p. 307), who stated that "[laughter] naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small − only when there is what we may call a descending incongruity." To Spencer (1919, p. 306) laughter is "[the] discharge of arrested feelings into the muscular system, takes place only in the absence of other adequate channels." Incongruous input causes an emotional change, and in the case of a humorous response, resulting in the contraction of facial muscles and certain muscles in the abdomen. The epiglottis half closes the larynx, resulting in giggling, guffawing, or gasping, and tear ducts are activated. These outputs of the nervous system one refers to as laughter can be arrived at through a number of pathways through the cells of the brain, fabricated in each individual through their life up to that point. All credits,

undoubtedly, go to Spencer for the assumption that venting of some overloaded intellectual energy is the most essential factor in the genesis of laughter. To sum up, Spencer regards laughter to be in the physiological dimension, in the categories of psychomotor reflexes, causing stimulation, strong feelings that stimulate movements of muscles. His conception is classified as one belonging to the theory of contrast because laughter is provoked by the absurdity of a sudden transfer from great thing to small.

Another theorist of humour with sociological insight was Henri Bergson [1859−1941]. His theory is associated with incongruity theory and the negative feature as well as the conflict approach. Bergson's conception of the comic arises from his philosophical system. Bergson noticed a superego adjuster in laughter (or derision to be precise). Calling the philosophy of laughter an insolent task cast at philosophical speculation, he judged it mainly from a point of view of social usefulness. In his opinion, humour and laughter are essentially social and shared. Laughing at someone, on the other hand, functions as a means of exclusion, and hence as a social corrective and form of social control. He regarded mockery as an effective preventive means − arresting those differing from the norm and disciplining them in a situation when one does not obey the rules of the communal life. By analyzing the ways of provoking laughter he created aesthetic categories (verbal, psychological or physical gestures) for a specific purpose − to rear the society, to keep a tight rein on the superego. This is, according to Bergson, the social meaning of laughter. In his opinion, comic imagination is a kind of indifference, a gap turned against an individual, which has broken ranks by not obeying the rules of his or her group. Bergson compares laughter to a guard of proper values; a guard, who takes the rebel one to task. He states that the fear of being ridiculed is a very important factor in establishing social correctness. He emphasized, therefore, a social function of the humiliating humour in its nature, stating that "it restrains eccentricity" (Bergson, [1902] 1911, p. 20), mainly manifesting itself to deal with appearance and behaviour, routines, desires or opinions. Laughter, therefore, would be a guarantor of social order due to the anxiety of being derided publicly and because the contempt of others who threaten to expel one from a group motivates the strongest to submit to generally accepted conventions. In Bergson's theory one cannot find any spontaneity or joy. Such laughter stops being funny − and even kills any fun, killing the creative potential together with it.

Another interesting type of incongruity is presented by theories treating humour as a play. Johan Huizinga ([1924] 1956) in The Waning of The Middle Ages presents a conception which reduces any human act to the lowest common denominator − a play. Ludic forms of expression, according to Huizinga, are an earlier phenomenon than culture. They are a universal occurrence, an egalitarian one, but the forms of play are determined by social rank. He states that play is an activity that is accompanied by a feeling of tension, but that the feeling of relaxation it brings is some kind of open-minded state, which is an agreement to diversity. The things that please one are dependent on the instincts which one shows. The participants of the communicative act

defined by a situational play context always accomplish a cultural pattern, which is fully contained in Huizinga's *homo ludens* concept. The nature of incongruity in the theories is the juxtaposition of a real situation to a simulation in play. The aim of the theories is to make play boundaries, which help to recognize flippant intensions and research various ways of anticipating intentions to tell a joke (Brzozowska, 2000, p. 24).

Contemporary incongruity theories are being explored by the English anthropologists Gregory Bateson and William Fry − the distinguished American scholar of research on humour. Bateson (1969, pp. 159–166) singles out a paradox as the basic driving force of humour, while Fry ([1963] 2011, p. 135) presents humour as something derived from a contradiction between something which is real and something unreal, distinguishing three main types of humour: canned jokes, situational jokes and practical jokes. Fry states that humour is the essence of a creative act. Its nature is based on the confrontation of two objects having ostensibly or deceptively nothing in common and yet creating a relationship between them (absurdity). Other evidence shows that absurd thinking is characteristic of people with a good transfer of information between the left and right hemispheres – people highly skilled at linking visual thinking with abstract thinking, because in such conditions arises an idea. Laughter presented as a tool for developing creativity, broadens the perception channel and as a tool for obtaining joy may be treated as an everyday mysticism.

3. Superiority

The superiority theory is mainly connected with social relations. This tradition may date back to Plato and Aristotle, and was most famously defined and created by Thomas Hobbes. Aristotle stated that most often people laugh at mistakes and ugliness, which do not cause any pain or moral loss. This gave rise to Aristotle's ([384 BC–322 BC]; 9) outstanding definition: "Comedy is an imitation of characters of lower type, not, however in the full sense of the word bad , the ludicrous being merely the subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive."[1] He called for separation of the ridiculousness from derision, directing comedy on a path towards harmlessness. Nevertheless, he does not expand on who might not deserve any harm or suffering in spite of any incorrect and ugly features of the comical object. Aristotle characterized humour mainly from the object side. Concluding, one may recognize that Aristotle's concept of humour explains several of its aspects. However, it does not cover complex forms of humour, where laughter combines with sympathy or anger. In modern times, Thomas Hobbes [1588−1679] − an English philosopher − created a similar theory of humour to the Aristotelian one. In his philosophical work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes mainly devotes his attention to the socio-political theory, and presents an interpretation of the superiority theory in a short

[1] Trans. by S. H. Butcher

paragraph only. At the same time, he criticizes such an attitude. The Hobbesian conception of humour assumes that the one who bursts into laughter feels superior to the object of laughter, which arouses the cheerfulness. Hobbes ([1651] 1981, p. 125) states that: "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly." As mentioned above, Hobbes presented one of the most arrogant conceptions of laughter. In his opinion, the greatest success is to defeat enemies. Nothing, according to Hobbes, is more enjoyable and more makes one laugh than unhappiness of others. Laughter is a spontaneous manifest of the feeling of triumph connected with a sudden conscious, that, at least in some respects, one predominates over another. It is worth mentioning that Hobbes is regarded as the precursor of the modern aesthetics, because, as the point of departure for his deliberations, he puts the interests of the human ego, i.e., business and freedom. The concept of the laws of nature is entangled in a doctrine based on ethical egoism. Hobbes' anthropology is pessimistic, then. The assumptions of Aristotle and Hobbes' conceptions have been developed by the nineteenth-century British psychologist Alexander Bain (1859: 283), who proposed a theory of degradation. Bain observed the comical as the degradation of the elegant and the solemn to the inferior; he states that humour results from degrading a noble person or a blinding revelation in a situation which does not cause any other powerful sensation (a fall of an elegant gentleman or an actor's mistakes during his speech on a stage). The act of degrading an object to a rank of something inferior and low, for Bain, is the essence of humour. Another theoretician of humour was Karl Ueberhorst [1823−99], who came also very close to the positions represented earlier by Aristotle and Hobbes. Ueberhorst in his two-volume work Das Komische (1896, pp. 528 – 533, 542) states that the indication of a bad feature may seem comical when we do not become aware of the same bad feature in ourselves and when it does not evoke strong unpleasant feelings in us. The truth is that it is much easier to laugh at vices which one does not possess. Karl Ueberhorst claims that the causes of laughter are the vices observed in others, connected with the inner conviction that one lacks the same such feature, which fact is pleasant for one, and which leads to the climax point of the comical moment as one feels one's own hegemony. The virtue of Ueberhorst's conception is an attempt to describe the nature of humour from both the objective and subjective perspectives.

Disputes over language considering it to be the creator of one's picture of reality or a definitive power determining the form of an idea about one's world, have persisted in the realm of scientific debate for many hundreds of years and it seems that it may take much longer yet to arrive at any consensus. It would seem advisable to collect as much empirical evidence in favour of a particular definition as possible. This assay, although it may be only fragmentary, calls up ethno linguistics. Such an endeavour may be supported by the thesis of Edward Sapir (1921, p. 221) which states that socially shaped language has an influence on the way people express reality. Further, this statement suggests that ethno linguists' studies on archaic peoples are not limited solely

to their specific magical thinking. Indeed, their knowledge of spells is equivalent to their knowledge of magic and this, in particular, forms the conviction that one is able to influence reality thanks to a special language code. This fact spawns the conviction that there is a cure for all evil. Otherwise, the picture of a harmless world becomes broken.

4. British Sense of Humour

In antiquity humour was equated with body fluids and temperament. In the 18th century, the notion of humour was broadened to deviant and eccentric behaviours accompanied by unintentional laughter. In those times, theorists started to use notions of humour for describing abilities to afflict others with, usually, strange behaviour. Therefore, it was not only a person with strange features but also a person who found it pleasant to pretend strange afflictions. The 18th century became the century of the humane humour. People no longer laughed at human disabilities but at common human complaints and paradoxes in the surrounding world. A sense of humour started to be defined in opposition to wit. Humour was graded: from the ability to amuse, to the possession of virtue, which was expressed in a positive attitude towards oneself and reality. In the 19th century, humour became a peculiar interest for Britons, based on toleration and the need to coexist with other nations. Thus, in 19th century Britain, humour was treated as a cardinal virtue, wisdom, a transcendental and metaphysical attitude directed towards the search for truth. It had a deeply humane and philosophical meaning. It was at this time when the term 'sense of humour' was created. A sense of humour is "the ability to notice funny things, sensitivity to the comical" (Szymczak, 1998, p. 57)[1]. The British tend to treat things with a sense of humour. However, it happens sometimes that the British sense of humour in its various forms is one of the most frequent causes of misunderstanding in contacts between representatives of other nations and Britons. Undoubtedly, the unwritten rules of British humour, to some degree, contribute to the latter mentioned assertion. Nevertheless, the most painful situation may be when one stumbles over the rule of irony and the rule of "anything but not too serious". Humour in British comedy is mainly based on the nature of everyday British humour. Because the two terms, humour and comedy, are often confused and merged into one concept, it is vital to stress that this paper is concerned with British humour, and not British comedy. The paper deals with the use of humour in everyday life, in regular conversations, not humorous novels, poems, skits, satirical monologues, comedy plays or funny picture jokes. British comedy follows the rules of British humour, and also plays an important social role because it hands down the rules from generation to generation and strengthens them. Humour in most British comedies is based mainly on absurdity, irony, sarcasm, situational humour, surprise and unpredictability, together with humiliation. Practically in all the best British comedies Britons mock themselves. One may consider British comedy not of a higher quality

[1]All the translations done by the author, unless otherwise noted.

than that from other countries, nevertheless, the fact that in British comedies there is no concept of a separate 'time and place' for humour, and that humour permeates the consciousness of Britons means that British comedy writers, artists and performers must have quite a struggle to make a British spectator laugh. The comic must do something more and reach beyond the everyday humour present everyman's contacts. It is not easy to amuse Britons, even though they have a sensitive sense of humour. Quite the contrary, as their sharpened sense of humour and culture transfused with irony make it even more difficult to make Britons laugh than any other nation. As a result there is a broad variety of comedies − good, bad or indifferent. If something is not funny for Britons, it does not mean that it is the result of the lack of efforts of the humourist. An important element in British humour is black humour. This type of humour is present in well-known comedy series, like: *Fawlty Towers, Keeping Up Appearances, 'Allo, 'Allo, Are You Being Served, Mr Bean, Monty Python's Flying Circus, Benny Hill or Absolutely Fabulous* and many more.

Humour in British life is overwhelming, omnipotent and omnipresent. Humour rules. Every aspect of life and culture in Britain is imbued with humour. A significant number of the British think that their sense of humour is special and better than other nations have. Britons believe that they have a kind of global monopoly, if not on humour itself, then, at least, on a few types of it − in particularly the exclusive ones, such as intelligent wit and irony. There is something, probably, which makes British humour special, something that makes England the cradle of humour in the modern meaning of this word. The defining feature is *social value*, which is attributed to humour − its absolute central meaning in British culture and social relationships. Undoubtedly, there is a touch of humour in most conversations between Britons. They cannot say hello or talk about the weather without making funny comments. In Britain, the weather is always an interesting, and even passionate, subject and one should be good at talking about it (Mikes, 1991, p. 22). Most British conversations include, at least, a dose of bantering, cutting remarks, allusions, irony, auto irony, mockery or simply tomfoolery. If, then, British humour is not only an act of the intellect, it is an attitude of liking towards a funny person. A British humourist loves people whom he or she laughs at. For Britons the rules of humour are a cultural counterpart for the laws of nature, which they automatically obey − more or less like the law of gravity.

Gilbert Chesterton [1874−1936], a writer and catholic publicist, poet, critic, essayist, thinker and a master of the grotesque, paradox and absurd humour and an expert on the matter, discovered the early features of British humour in the medieval works of Chaucer. Chesterton ([1902] 1911, pp. 2−18, pp. 65−68) stated that humour was a special feature of Chaucer's poems. Chaucer treated humour seriously, regarding it as one of the best and most effective instruments in the fight for principles and a vital means of perceiving and experiencing reality in a mundane and normal way. Chesterton also noticed a need to introduce healthy humour and paradoxical combinations into the subject of religion and also made an attempt to introduce it into

everyday life − sometimes trivial, prosaic, funny, naive, though full of serious matters, such as vices, temptations, bad habits or even fundamental human faults. He emphasized that humour should be treated seriously because it is derived from the reception and propagation of moral and spiritual rules concerning the most important and difficult problems. Chesterton suggested Catholics learn how to live with smiling faces, which would help them treat their relationships with God and themselves with humbleness. This would give some freedom of latitude in thinking. He was sure that that humour was an important condition of culture and its interpretation, at the same time.

British humour is characterized by:

1. some kind of bizarreness, which manifests itself in nonsense, absurdity and paradox;
2. a subjective mockery (auto irony is humour itself), expressing liking and tolerance rather than aggression against others (opposite to irony);
3. civilized and cheerful satire and cynicism (irony imparts them with a tart taste);
4. sometimes sorrow, the nobleness of which was analyzed by Freud;
5. oblique statements − a peculiarly British form (a rule close to the not-too-serious rule, the give-me-a-break rule).

These rules present the heart of British humour, which thanks to fast communication − and subsequent loss of Britain's island character − enjoyed global spread in the 20th century in all branches, including: philosophy, the arts, literature, history, religion and customs. In a broad sense, irony is the main feature of British humour. Irony is "a camouflaged mockery, where its hidden sense is the denial of the literal sense" (Dziemidok, 1967, p. 90). Only in as much as humour judges people with understanding do satire and irony have a specific corrective target, pointing out mistakes and vices. Irony, in a pessimistic and critical way, points out the differences between the desired and actual state . It is hard to explicitly describe irony because it assumes various forms of existence in art and life. What is more, irony has been given different names throughout the centuries and in philosophical schools. On the basis of theoretical deliberations, three types of irony can be identified. The first one, according to Socrates, sees irony as a tool for cognition and moral training. The second one, which Schlegel presented, is irony used as the creative objectivity of an artist. The third one − created by Solger and Hegel − shows irony as a spiritual and historical process (Passi, 1980, pp. 269 − 270). In contrast, according to Harald Hoffding, cited by Passi (1980, p. 325), − irony and pure humour depend on where wit and solemnity are placed in them.

Britons usually do not have any patriotic boasts − they are even regarded as inappropriate. There is, though, one exception to this rule and this is patriotic pride,

which they feel because of their sense of humour, especially because of their proficiency in irony. Although humour is universal and irony is a universally important element of humour, no nation can appropriate a monopoly on it. This apart, the issue of irony is an issue of scale − a quantity scale rather than a quality one. The omnipresence of irony and its meaning is special in British humour − irony is its dominant element and not only a juicy detail. According to a character in one of Alan Bennet's plays, Britons are created in irony. They are already immersed in irony in the mother's womb. Irony is in the foetal waters, joking without any jokes, bothering without bothering at all, being serious without any seriousness (O' Mealy, 2013, p. 58). John B. Priestley ([1929] 1976, p. 23) noticed: "[the] atmosphere in which we English live is favourable to humour. It is so often hazy, and very rarely is everything clear−cut." He placed the talent for irony on the top of his list of the elements of British humour.

The oblique statement is a form of irony and humour. The rule of oblique statements is very British. It concerns self-restraint and modesty, which regulate everyday social relationships. Here are some examples: when an Englishman wants to confess his love, he pats his lady on her back and quietly says: "You know, I have nothing against you." When he is crazy about his lover, he says: "I like you, in fact." If he wants to marry her, he says: "Listen… how about…?" Usually, someone says: "Listen…" and then doesn't let one know for three days (Mikes, 1991: 26). The English are famous for their use of oblique statements not because of inventing the form, but because of its perfect and frequent usage. Mikes (1991, p. 163) writes that oblique statements, still practiced [in Briton], are not a special feature of British humour but also their lifestyle.

British auto irony as well as oblique statement may be considered a form of irony. They are based not on authentic modesty but on saying something completely opposite to what one wants the recipient to understand. The humour of British auto irony, just like oblique statement, is exclusive, very often to the extent that it is almost imperceptible, and for those who are not familiar with the rules of British modesty, practically incomprehensible. British auto irony is a complicated game based on bluffing. After taking the rules of irony and its subcategories − oblique statements and auto irony – into consideration, it becomes obvious that it is not uniquely British, but the scale of their usage in a British conversation that gives a typical British taste to their jokes.

5. Superiority and Incongruity in the *Fawlty Towers* Comedy Series Episode *The Hotel Inspectors*

Fawlty Towers is a comedy series produced for BBC Television. The show was written by John Cleese (a member of the Monty Python group) and Connie Booth (his ex-wife), both of whom starred in the show. Fawlty Towers is a British situational comedy. A comedy of situations is not made of jokes themselves, neither is it a succession of telling funny tales. In fact, it is based on a whole range of ingredients

mixed together in a specific way. Some of the ingredients are characterisation and status conflicts − the way each character behaves and interacts with other characters and the surroundings. Here, Cleese as the main character runs a hotel together with his wife and he desperately struggles to inject a touch of class into his tacky surroundings. He is a quick tempered person, having a heightened sense of self-importance which results in being rude to almost everyone. Nevertheless, he is terrified of his wife, Sybil, who is too controlling. He craves to stand up to her, but his plans regularly come into conflict with her demands. Basil Fawlty is surrounded by numerous characters which make him feel depressed somehow. Manuel, a Spanish waiter who cannot speak English properly, takes all Fawlty's insults and sometimes physical violence and continues to work as well as he is able to. There is also Polly (a maid), a calm and sensible, attractive young woman; Major Gowen, whom one may find often in the bar; the down-to-earth chef Terry; and two charming old ladies, Miss Gatsby and Miss Tibbs. The dominant ingredient is insult. Actually, the more insults the louder the laughter. Basil Fawty insults Manuel the most, but other characters too. Yet another ingredient, the response to his insults, is different and depends on the insulted person. And the last but not least ingredient can be seen in the characters' speech styles. Basil, when not under stress, speaks slowly, distinctly, with his head high but it changes as he gets more and more nervous and under pressure. He gets louder, speaks through his teeth using mimics, which helps him to express himself even more.

6. Analysis

In Basil and Sybil's interactions one may see that Basil seems to be kind to his wife, just as to him, by repeating words like: *dear* and *darling*, and yet suddenly, at the same time, violating the situation with words that are far from what is warm and expected. In the first scene, Sybil is gossiping on the phone and one can hear only her speaking, not the one she talks to. It creates incongruity because it seems as if she were talking about some features of a man, like: *Well anything in trousers, yes… or out of them preferably or Nineteen? and Well the last one was only twenty-two… he was!*[1] At the end of the scene Basil, who expects his wife to take care of their own business, shows superiority by saying *Darling, when you're finished… why don't you lie − down?*

In the next part of the scene, Basil shows his superior attitude towards Hutchinson – the new arrival – after the guest's sophisticated and rather old-fashioned speech, by saying *Are you alright?*, which is evidently not understood by Hutchinson because he keeps his own discourse through the whole part of the conversation. What is more, Basil also wants to show the guest who is in charge by being unwilling to fulfil his wish of drawing the way on his map. Fawlty gets more nervous and the tension grows.

[1] All the citations in this chapter are italicized and may be found in: Cleese, John and Connie Booth (1977, pp. 85 - 150) Fawlty Towers. London: Contact Publications Limited.

The interaction with Manuel starts politely with a question *Would you take these cases to room seven?* but (as in any other episode) Basil shows his impatience towards Manuel's famous quote *Que?*, which means that he does not understand English. This time, unexpectedly, Fawlty takes some cards from under his reception desk, already prepared, which makes the situation funny by incongruity. The viewer does not expect him to have such cards. What is more, he continues to talk to his guests while communicating non-verbally and without paying much attention to Manuel at the same time.

From the beginning of the interaction between Basil and Sybil it is obvious what their attitude is towards themselves. Basil tries to show Sybil how hard he works at the hotel, while she is occupied with trivial things, such as gossiping on the phone or filing her nails. He says: *Did you get entangled in the eiderdown again… not enough cream in your éclair? Hmmm? Or did you have to talk to all your friends for so long that you didn't have time to perm your ears…* In this way he shows superiority by doing more relevant things like talking to guests and deals with stressful situations in the lobby. He complains that the hotel attracts only people whom he calls *cretins* and *yobbos*. He feels so self-important that he would rather have upper-class guests, but not everyone from the street. He is impolite, even rude to his guests, which Sybil points out to him *[and] it might help business if you showed a little courtesy, just a little*.

The whole conversation is a constant exchange of nasty remarks between the couple: Basil describes Sybil as *[m]y little nest of vipers* or, here, in this episode, Sybil says to Basil *The day you co-operate you'll be in a wooden box.* Suddenly, there is a twist of action when Basil gets to know that Sybil heard, on the phone, some important news for him, which he trivialized at the beginning by saying *Oh this'll be good. Let me guess… The Mayor wears a toupee? Somebody's got nail varnish on their cats? Am I getting warm…?*

He loses his advantage over Sybil. There are some hotel inspectors in the town. Basil is stunned and runs after Sybil to get more information. This time, it is Sybil, who shows her superiority over Basil when he chases her, with his long legs making long steps (which makes the situation even more incongruous), across the lobby and to the reception desk.

Incongruity occurs when Hutchinson insists on reserving a channel to watch a very important documentary for him, which turns out to be a film about the leader of the Blackfoot Indians in 1860's. The viewer expects the documentary to be about a significant event or person, and the leader of the Blackfoot Indians in 1860's is the last thing one may expect. Even though Basil seems to be terrified about the news of hotel inspectors, he does not change his behaviour and feels superior to Mr. Hutchinson by being rude to him and ignoring him. Basil thinks that he gains advantage over his guest by responding rudely *I'm sorry, are you talking to me?* or *Why don't you talk properly?* The situation changes after Hutchinson's words *It might interest you to*

learn that I have a wide experience of hotels and many of them have the foresight to make arrangements of this kind for the benefit of their guests. Fawlty realizes that his guest may be one of the hotel inspectors. His superiority vanishes.

In this part of Fawlty and Hutchinson's interaction one may notice how quickly Fawlty becomes submissive to his guest. Now, it is Hutchinson, who is the superior one. What is more, Basil starts to use Hutchinson's discourse by using sophisticated vocabulary and grammar in his long sentences *Why don't you introduce another scheme right away, along the lines you suggested, by which I reserve the BBC 2 channel for you tonight.* or *It is to be found in the South Wing, just overlooking the courtyard, where there is of course ample parking.*, and polite expressions, like: *I beg your pardon?*, *Not at all.* and *Indeed we do.*

Fawlty sustains the discourse and his polite behaviour by introducing Polly to Hutchinson. He recognizes Polly as the one who spilt juice on him during breakfast and feeling superior, he wags his finger at her and calls her *naughty girl*. She gives as good as she gets by responding to him: *And you moved the glass, didn't you?*, which makes her feel superior as well. On the contrary to Fawty's regular behaviour, he tries to appease the conflict by saying: *Thank you, thank you, Polly.*, which makes the situation even more incongruent when he starts to praise her with words: *Awfully nice girl. She's very bright. Fully qualified painter, you know.* Finally, he is able to change the subject by saying*: Good morning, ladies.* to Miss Tibbs and Miss Gatsby which diverts Hutchison's attention.

In the dining room, Hutchison shows his superiority over Polly again, when she takes his order: *And all on the plate please, none on the tablecloth.* to which Polly counters: *Excuse me, you're not by any chance the Duke of Kent are you?*, which he does not understand as an irony and answers rather flattered: *No, no… oh no. No way.*

Incongruity occurs later again, in the conversation between Manuel and Walt − another guest. Walt greets Manuel with: *Good afternoon* when he answers: *No, no, is no sun. Is not good for me. (…) I homesick.* Manuel understood the greeting literally, which makes the situation incongruent; one expects the waiter just to answer in the common way, not to express himself this way by complaining about his life in England. Then, as Manuel cannot speak English well, and does not understand Walt again when he is trying to find his table by saying that he is from room number 7, Manuel points up the stairs and says: *You go here… up… (indicates to the right at the top of the stairs) Room seven.* Then Walt says that he wants a table for one and Manuel understands the words wrongly again: *Ah! Table one. Here. (Indicates a table in the middle of the room) Please.* Suddenly, Manuel realizes that he has indicated the wrong table: *I so sorry, but I think you say for room and I do it for I am myself not want know it easily.* Now Walt does not understand him. Manuel continues: *You… room ten? No. Room seven. (…) No, no, this table one. Is Wednesday. Room seven here is table five. Please.* The viewer gets confused together with Walt – the character – thanks to the ingenious incongruity.

As if that were not enough, Manuel explains: *Seven is what I think you say but one is for table not for this one so is come se habla en Ingles pero puedo ver las nombres solamente quando estan delante de me.*, which makes the situation even more complicated to understand. The tension grows, when Basil sees Walt sitting at Hutchison's table and asks: *What are you doing there?* Walt is confused again. Basil explains: *Well this isn't table five, is it? (sees the plastic table number; it says "Five") Tch. (picks it up, shaking his head and moves to another table) Now would you come over here please, this is table five (puts the "Five" down on the new table and takes an "Eight" off and puts it in his pocket) Come on!* Walt says that Manuel showed him this table and again Basil shows his superiority over the waiter with the words: *Well he's hopeless, isn't he? You might as well ask the cat. (Inexcusably) Now settle down, come on, come on.*

In the latter scene one may observe superiority in the scene with Basil, Walt and the wine. Basil corrects Walt's pronunciation of the name of the wine he had chosen after registering the price which makes him sound even more superior: *Oh! The Cortonne. Yes, of course, my pleasure.* The incongruity occurs when the viewer expects Basil to open professionally the bottle of wine and he makes three attempts to uncork it and finally, when he manages to pour some wine into a glass, Walt says: *I'm afraid this is corked.* Basil replies: *I just uncorked it. Didn't you see me?* and: *[my] dear fellow I took it out. That's how I got the Cortonne out of the bottle into your glass.* Walt meant that the cork had reacted with wine and gone bad. Basil tastes the wine and puts the glass on the table again and says he will bring another bottle and sarcastically reprimands him: *Right! Right! That's cost me hasn't it? No, it doesn't matter.* and moves to exit to show his superiority again by asking Walt: *Are you having the mackerel or the lamb?* After Walt's words: *…The lamb*, Basil continues to be sarcastically kind: *Thank you. I'll have another one standing by just in case.*

Incongruity takes place as the situation changes when Sybil tells Basil that Hutchison is not a hotel inspector as Basil had thought. This makes her fell superior over her husband. Sybil sweetly asks: *How are you getting along with your hotel inspector?* Basil does not suspect any deceit in her words being sure that everything is under control and says: *…Fine. Fine!* and starts to leave, when suddenly Sybil says: *He sells spoons.* Basil surprised comes back and cannot believe the news. Sybil explains to him that she had listened in on Hutchison's phone call. Basil, shocked, and not willing to show his embarrassment, replies, distracting her attention: *You listened in to a private call of one of our guests?* and then he becomes angry because of the feeling he has been fooled and wants revenge. Basil enters and stalks the sitting Hutchison. He starts with saying quietly the word spoons to end up with shouting this word angrily. Then he starts to mock Hutchison, to sound more superior, saying how fascinating it is to work in the spoon trade and comparing it with being a hotel inspector.

The next scene adds incongruity when Polly places a wrong order on Hutchison's table. Hutchison protests and Basil continues to be superior over him with the words: *Is*

there something we can get for you, Mr. Hutchison? A tea cosy for your pepper pot perhaps? These sarcastic words refer to Hutchison's previous wishes, like: reserving a channel, fresh peas and ice bucket. The incongruity evolves as Polly, Sybil, Manuel and Basil keep confusing the dishes and drinks by delivering them to wrong tables. First, Polly with the omelet, then Sybil with the pate and Manuel who opens the wine for Walt and Basil doing the same not knowing that it is the third opened bottle. Polly comes with a lamb casserole for Hutchison which is another mistake. When it seems that the situation cannot be more complicated, Hutchison says: *Excuse me!! I'm going to change my mind. …I won't have the cheese salad. I wish to cancel it.* Unexpectedly, Basil realizes that he was too rude to Hutchison and tries to calm him down together with Polly.

The situation changes again after Basil realizes that Walt may be one of the hotel inspectors. After being quite superior, he starts behaving kindly and submissive to Walt asking whether his guest is satisfied with his food and drinks: *The wine's really good?* or *And the pate was alright?*, and *And the casserole?*, which starts to irritate Walt. Basil walks away and hears Hutchison when Manuel is pressing the guest to accept an omelette: *This is quite absurd, no I'm sorry but I have had enough of this.* Trying to save the situation, Basil admires the cheese salad, which finally arrives. This does not help. Hutchison gets furious and Basil gets his hands over Hutchison's mouth laughing to other guests. Hutchison wriggling says: *Let me go, I can't breathe.* and Basil merrily: *Ha ha ha ha ha ha!* just to say: *Shut up then.* Hutchison leaps convulsively, Basil thumps him on the back saying: *Don't worry… a bit of cheese went the wrong way.* Basil beams, and slips in a quick rabbit punch. Hutchison's face lands in his plate with cheese salad. Basil says: *Ah, never mind, he's fainted poor chap!* The viewer expects Basil to panic and call for help but he seems to be imperturbable feeling superior over his guest by having humiliated him. Fawlty carries Hutchison together with Manuel into the bar, telling Sybil that the guest has fainted. Another example of incongruity follows in this episode. At the reception, Basil meets Walt. He acts as if everything is alright, asks Walt about meals and says he feels sorry about the incident with the guest chocking himself. Suddenly, Hutchison comes into the reception. Basil says he is sorry about the accident with the piece of cheese and suggests discussing it in the bar. Hutchison says: *No I'll come in here and discuss it.* Again, the viewer expects the two gentlemen to discuss the situation verbally when, all of the sudden, Hutchison hits Basil in his face disappearing below his desk. After a while, he stands up and ironically says: *Well that lie-down obviously did you some good.* One thinks that Basil should do the same thing to Hutchison, or at least to be embarrassed but he reacts in a totally unexpected way. Hutchison slaps his face again. Basil reels towards Walt's end of the desk, nevertheless Hutchison hits him twice more and then tree times more when Basil flops out of sight. Hutchison concludes: *I am not a violent man, Mr. Fawlty.*, which is the quintessence of the incongruity in this scene. After beating Basil so hard that he finally could not stand up, he says that he is not brutal at all. At the end of the scene it occurs that Walt is not a hotel inspector, which may confuse the viewer for the

second time. Basil becomes so happy and free that he hits upon an idea of how to say good bye to Hutchison. He rushes to the kitchen. In the meanwhile, three men walk into the hotel. Finally, these are the real inspectors. Hutchison comes down the stairs and Manuel shouts: *Please, please! Mr. Fawlty want say adios.* Basil pours some cream into Hutchison's case, shakes it well and says: *Now go away. If you ever come back I shall kill you.* This is the moment of another twist of the situation, when triumphantly smiling at the new guests, Basil realizes that they are hotel inspectors and desperately cries: *AAAAgh!!*

7. Conclusions

The analysis has shed light on the way superiority and incongruity have been used in *The Hotel Inspectors*, one of the episodes of *Fawlty Towers* comedy series. It has been shown that superiority and incongruity work together, complementing each other. To summarize, a simplified definition of the comic is given by Neale and Krutnik (1990, p. 67): "[a]ll instances of the comic involve a departure from the norm, whether the norm be one of action, appropriate behaviour, conventional dress, or stereotypical features". According to this definition, the impression of the comic is caused by incongruity between two patterns, a collision of two stereotypes. Incongruity is a violation of the norm of a subjective imagination of how things should be. It becomes obvious that what one recognizes as incongruous may not necessarily be that incongruous for others. It depends on one's experience and individual expectations. Another concept closely related to incongruity and the comic is that of surprise, irony and sarcasm. Surprise is a frequent element used in *Fawlty Towers*. In the discussed episode we deal with many surprising situations, like the one at the reception desk at the beginning, when Basil takes some cards from below the desk and shows pictures of his requests to Manuel to make communication with him easier. What is more, at the end of the communication, which is completely unexpected by the viewer Manuel shows a card with the writing *OK*. Another example of a surprise is when Manuel tries to be helpful and does as much as he can when showing a table to Walt. His bad English complicates the situation and, as an effect, the guest has to change the table three times to finally, sit at the right one.

Irony and sarcasm may be difficult to explain separately. In some cases one explains the other. Barry Blake (2007, p. 19) describes irony as "incongruity between the innocence or ignorance of a participant and the knowledge of the author and audience." while sarcasm "usually involves someone saying something that is the opposite of what is appropriate, often in a derisive or mocking tone." (Blake, 2007, p. 21). An example of irony used in Fawlty Towers may be visible especially in conversations of Basil and Sybil. The ironic dialogue occurs at the beginning of the episode when Sybil finishes her phone call with a friend and says that she has been working and expects Basil to work as hard as she does. After a difficult morning Basil asks Sybil: *Oh dear, what*

happened? Did you get entangled in the eiderdown again… not enough cream in your éclair? Hmmm? Or did you have to talk to all your friends for so long that you didn't have time to perm your ears… (Cleese, 1977, p. 98) He also denigrates her business call and the news she has got with irony in his tone by saying: *(…)Let me guess… The Mayor wears a toupee? Somebody's got nail varnish on their cats? Am I getting warm…?* (Cleese, 1977: 98) Sarcasm is also present in dialogues between the hotel owners. Basil often calls his wife: *my little nest of vipers* (Cleese, 1977, p. 98) or *my little piranha fish* (Cleese, 1977: 158) with a characteristic irony in his tone and semi-smile on his face.

Superiority is a concept that closely relates to incongruity. Superior characters often are presented as cruel mockers, their humour is aggressive. They predominate over their victims. Nevertheless, these types of characters may seem ridiculous to spectators, as the spectators expect them to act to the contrary. In Fawlty Towers, the viewer deals mainly with two types of characters: the strong ones and the weak ones. The weak ones are usually objects ridiculed by the strong ones. An example of such a relationship is that of Basil and Manuel. Basil often shows his superior attitude towards Manuel by saying: *Well he's hopeless, isn't he? You might as well ask the cat* (Cleese, 1977, p. 110) and *You're waste of space* or *He's from Barcelona.* (Cleese, 1977, p. 128) Basil also uses physical violence and often hits and prods Manuel. All of the mentioned acts of violence are treated by Manuel as a regular behaviour of his employer and the best way to handle this, is to run away to another room.

8. Concluding Remarks

The comic – humour, wit and laughter, and their various expressions, types and genres – serves essential social functions; both negative (such as alienation, humiliation), and positive ones (such as relieving tension, social criticism, forming and strengthening relationships). At the same time they play a vital role in people's everyday life. The linguistic analysis of the materials used during writing this thesis permits one to state that the aim of humour has always been and still is to ridicule some attitudes or behaviours, which since the early ages of the society have objected to the established rules. Various types of source information, such as belles-lettres, specialist literature or individual observation create the common core for humour, which is derived from the social life of humans. During primitive folk ceremonies or the ancient peoples' rites – at the beginning of humour – one function was created the sharpest. It was elimination through ridicule of all elements of social life that might threaten a given society, either the harmonious whole or particular groups or units.

It is said that satire kills. One should not ascribe this statement solely to a figurative sense. There are examples in primitive societies of ridiculed members committing suicide. An outstanding cultural anthropologist, Bronisław Malinowski, both in *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929), and *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*

(1944), cites facts which prove the significant role of ridicule, insults and mockery in the life of Malaysian tribes. Stigmatizing marital infidelity, breaking the rules of exogamy or other social crimes publicly had such strong consequences, that usually it led to committing suicide by the culprit (Malinowski, [1944] 1958, pp. 353 − 354). Ridicule and contempt were also a strong sanction against sexual dissolution and deviations (Malinowski, [1929] 1938, pp. 379 − 391). In Ancient Greece, Archilochus (c.680−c.645 BC), was a symbolic character whose satire was regarded as so venomous that all travellers were warned not to pass by his grave. However, the Japanese are especially sensitive in this respect. During the Second World War, Japanese soldiers, instilled with the belief they would be ridiculed if they surrendered would often kill themselves. Another example concerns Japanese sailors warned about obeying rules and orders when taking seats in rescue boats. If not, the world would laugh at them; Americans would make a film and then show it in New York. Being laughed at by the world is for the Japanese more dreadful than any violence (Benedict, [1946] 1954, pp. 261−273).

This murderous and radical function of the comic found its primitive expression in magical rituals. Supernatural magical powers, which were attributed to the comic, appeared in Greek Fertility Holidays. Sacrilegious tomfoolery and invectives of phallic songs could expel charms, famine and evil, and their sacred emblems and words summoned vital powers. Similar celebrations were familiar to many primitive peoples. When magic, loosing its primeval power, started to become an art, the comic became an artistic phenomenon. What is more, as a consequence, it became a subject of esthetical interest as well as of the history of art. The fact that very strong reaction often follows the act of being ridiculed ascribes in part the comic function. Thanks to this fact, the comic accomplishes a socially significant role of limiting forms of behaviour, acts and attitudes which are regarded as hostile, false or wrong. It should be noted that an individual or a group of people subjected to ridicule and becoming an object of humour reacts strongly only in exceptional circumstances, as in the ones mentioned above. Usually, in highly developed societies, where humour is more sublime and sophisticated, the reaction – though perhaps deeply felt – is less visible. It is worth mentioning that the ridiculed one is especially exposed to public condemnation when one previously enjoys broad public respect. Among such humours which are limited to only one environment and one group it may be discovered that they are universal in character when similar phenomena against which the humour is aimed are found in different social groups and époques. Humour may ridicule both something that is old from a new position, as well as attack something that is new or modern and is in danger of demolishing an existing structure. The weapon in this struggle, since the beginning of time, is laughter.

Humour is an inventive tool. It shows maliciousness in great things and greatness in malicious ones. Thanks to humour one is able to rise above mediocrity and oneself, having fun at the same time. Humour opens reality to fiction, setting its spirit free from

the laws of nature and hard facts. It permits one to take part in the game of life serving moral, entertainment, intellectual and hedonistic aims. Experts on humour say that humour has got two souls – the first is in sensuality and the second one in heaven. It is hard to imagine the soul of humanity without humour, expressed by Aristotle in his statement, "of all living creatures only human beings have the ability to laugh." (Luck, 2000: 270) Humour and laughter are something very close to a man. Even though ideologies, needs, and doctrines have changed throughout the centuries, man has always been and still is the same *homo ridens*. Throughout the ages humans have laughed in the same way and, although it is not that obvious, at the same things. For it occurs that humour is timeless.

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