

## Book review

**Lundquist, Lita & Dyrbye, Helen (2022). *Danish Humour - Sink or Swim*.  
Friedriksberg: Samfundslitteratur.**

Is there such a thing as national humour? The question has not escaped scholarly attention. Ziv (1988) argues that since humour is a symbolic representation of the culture and temperament of a people, it can be expected to find significant differences between the types of humour of different states. Researchers have devoted entire monographs to describe the humour of particular countries (Constantinescu et al. 2020), and have conducted cross-cultural studies of humour styles in up to 28 countries (Schermer et al. 2019).

Lita Lundquist and Helen Dyrbye, authors of *Danish Humour – Sink or Swim*, believe not only that national humour exists, but that it is also possible, and even advisable, to learn its traits, since humorous comments are likely to be interpreted negatively when people sharing them have diverse cultural backgrounds. This is a recurrent situation with Danes, who, as it is assured in the book, often plunge, in their interactions with foreigners, into provocative, confrontational, and offensive waters. This usually causes extreme discomfort in the non-Danish recipients of the cutting remarks, particularly in the context of spontaneous conversational humour.

As an example of such sinking, in the introduction, authors resort to Lars von Trier's infamous comments during the 2011 edition of the Cannes Film Festival. While presenting his film *Melancholia*, he was asked about his German origins. Von Trier answered that he was a Nazi and that he sympathised a bit with Hitler. Readers are told that the acclaimed film director was only trying to be funny. However, his words were deemed as racially prejudiced and anti-Semitic. It was hardly possible to find them entertaining because certain features of Danish humour were lost in translation, particularly the way that humour is expressed linguistically in Danish and its penchant for irony and self-irony. It is necessary to explain these peculiarities of the Danish humour to an international audience to avoid bellyflops like Lars von Trier's. Nevertheless, Danes themselves must also be aware that their conversational attempts at humour can easily torpedo the best armour vessels of international relations. Hence this book, written precisely for these two target groups in a particular setting: Danes and non-Danes interacting in professional and other environments where humorous remarks are likely to appear.

Further in the Introduction it is stated that, as Lars von Trier, individuals can be funny only in their national way, because humour is the result of a moulding produced by the country and culture where we grow up and by the language we learn during childhood. In such context, we gradually build up our attitudes to humour during a lifetime. The term *humour socialisation* (Lundquist 2021) is retrieved to describe the way in which people of a given country are gradually “socialised” into certain forms of humour accepted by their society, its prevailing norms, and by the specific language that infuses and unites it. Therefore, the process of humour socialisation is a triangular relation that exists in every

country, each of its vertices being humour, language, and society. The triangle is applied to Denmark to explain the distinctive humour cultivated by its citizens.

To gather examples of Danish conversational humour and its reception by non-Danes, authors conducted interviews with several foreigners living and working in Denmark and asked them to relate incidents involving the use of humour while interacting with Danes, thus obtaining valuable data on conversational humour between Danes and non-Danes as well as its effects. This data is used later on in the book to inform Danes about the particularities of their national humour and the reasons why it can be frowned upon, but also to explain to foreigners that apparently nasty humorous retorts may not be such, but rather a friendly invitation to international mirth. The introduction ends with an optimistic note: despite unavoidable misunderstandings, the humour practised by people from other countries can be learnt by living, working or being around them.

Introduction aside, the book is divided into three parts, each of which, in turn, contains three chapters. These parts are respectively devoted to the humour, language, and society of Denmark. The first part of the book, *The “charms” of Danish humour*, details the characteristics of Danish conversational humour. Chapter 1, “Happiness, alcohol and sex”, describes how Danes show little respect for taboos when it comes to humour. Everything can be made fun of in the Nordic country: religion, sex, politics, foreigners, minorities, or the monarchy. Logically, such pervasiveness of humour may come as a surprise to people not used to joke about certain topics. In Chapter 2, “Authority, formality and privacy”, readers are warned that Danes easily let private remarks meddle into professional settings, thereby accentuating a potential work culture incongruity that shocks their non-Danish colleagues. However, as explained in Chapter 3, or “Rocking the boat with laughter”, the most disturbing aspect for non-Danes is when they are treated to the Danes’ preferred and persistent use of irony and self-irony. Both these humour forms imply an intimacy among those present that requires extensive shared background knowledge. For non-Danes, these ways of using humour may seem to exclude them from the group. But on more careful inspection, they could also be taken as invitations for foreigners to push the boat out, join the Danish community, and have some fun.

The second part is devoted to *The strengths of Danish society*, i.e. the peculiar characteristics of Danish society that have moulded the Danes’ sense of humour. Chapter 4, “The Danish and their ‘Great Humour’”, explains how each Dane’s humorous attitude is shaped from childhood by a succession of specific episodes experienced in particular social surroundings that form the common, or “great”, humour of the Danes. This process occurs in every country, but the social conditions specific to Danish society lead to the ironic and self-ironic remarks that non-Danes often find surprising and mortifying. It is stressed that this peculiar Danish humour is not innate, but a result of a very characteristic humour socialisation process. Chapter 5, “Humour civilisation”, provides more details of Danish humour, which is characterised by a fast duality of irony and self-irony rooted in a consensual, conflict-avoiding campfire mentality. It is suggested by the authors that this mentality might have its roots in the Viking Age, when harsh climatic conditions discouraged fights away from bonfires and promoted bloodless alternatives, such as dialogue-based consensus reached while staying close to a heating source. Chapter 6, “Humour, irony and self-irony”, deals with humour in the workplace. It is explained that the consensual mentality so ingrained in Danes makes them happily use their specific humour style when interacting professionally with foreigners, thus risking incomprehension from non-Danes, who, for their own cultural, social, and linguistic reasons, are not to use humour, irony, and self-irony in formal and professional settings.

The third part of the book is dedicated to language and humour, particularly to the features of *The baffling Danish language*. Danish is the perfect vehicle for the Danes' love for irony and self-irony, with certain quirks that are almost inaudible to foreigners. Chapter 7 deals with "Language and spontaneous verbal humour" in Denmark. Authors concede that people in any culture react spontaneously in their native language when a humorous remark is uttered. However, social constraints may exert heavier control on some people than others, and Danes are not particularly weighed down by strict social control when speaking their minds. Quite on the contrary, they are always ready to react speedily with a humorous comment on any situation, without taking time to consider the relevance and chances of success, thus increasing the possibilities of getting into a crisis when engaging in conversation with a non-Dane. In Chapter 8, aptly named "Meeting the Danish language", the reader is introduced to the Danes' first language. Danish has features that make it an exceedingly difficult language to learn and particularly to understand. It has about 40 different vocalic sounds (many of which do not sound very distinct), consonants that are turned into semi-vowels and swallowed syllables. Moreover, many words in Danish have a double meaning and, therefore, high humorous capacities. It also has a lot of resources that facilitate a constant flow of humorous discourse that it is extremely hard for foreigners to understand. Finally, when speaking English, Danes fail to use common discursive softeners to warn the non-Danish interlocutor that what follows is a humorous comment.

In Chapter 9, "Fathoming the Danish language and humour", it is revealed that Danish does not in fact lack softeners and face-saving mechanisms. There are numerous trigger words that are used to highlight Danes' frequent humorous intentions in conversation and to add some respect and politeness at the same time. These expressions are mostly monosyllabic unaccented adverbs that Danish people scatter abundantly in their speech and warn listeners not to take what has just been said too seriously. They are equally important to convey the irony and self-irony that Danes so usually recur to when joking. Sadly, these particles are almost imperceptible and hard to catch, even for those who master the language. They are also easily lost in translation. Logically, translating Danish utterances into English without the padding provided by such words increases the risk of incurring awkward situations in international communication.

Chapter 10 is the last of the book and some conclusions are drawn in it. Firstly, readers are advised not to think of Danes as rude. It would be more precise to say that they are not particularly worried about unnecessary social conventions. In their rush to take foreigners aboard, they tend to use their unique form of humour with them too early. Secondly, it is not their intention to offend. Rather, they are trying to create an informal, hierarchy-free atmosphere where a consensus can be achieved faster. The book ends as it starts – optimistically: although professional relations between people of different countries may be obscured by misunderstandings – often including humour – there is always a way out to be found by getting to know better the other's humour.

*Danish Humour – Sink or Swim* is an enjoyable and amusing reading. It contains entertaining information about the characteristics of Denmark's culture, history, and language. Moreover, it is backed by meaningful qualitative research and a very practical and resourceful understanding of main humour theories. It also develops and applies the notion of *humour socialisation* that allows for describing humour as a verbal, social and cultural phenomenon and that can be applied to any country. The book is nicely and clearly laid out: each chapter includes a final "Charting report" section and, similarly, an "Anchor points" section can be found at the end of each part, making it easy for the reader to follow. However, I believe that its main strength lies in the fact that, although

delimiting a very narrow research object, i.e. Danes' use of humour with non-Danes in professional settings, it reaches a broad audience. In my opinion, anyone dealing with people from other nationalities in formal and working settings may benefit from the reflections expressed in this book.

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