Transcultural Comedy
New forms of ethnic joking?
Academy of Science, Lodz 2009

Helga Kotthoff
Freiburg, Germany
Abstract

I will discuss transcultural humor practices and their relation to social identities taking most examples from German media. In a multicultural society, where identities and affiliations may constantly be at stake (Bierbach/Birken-Silverman 2007) immigrant and native comedians enact ‘hybrid’ identities and solidarities through new forms of stand-up comedy. I will analyze playful performances of ethnic stereotypes in the new genre of so-called “ethno-comedy” (in Germany).
Structure:

1. Ethnic joking
2. The spectrum of ethno-comedies
   2.1. Humor strategies: word play
   2.2. Overdoing ethnic stereotypes
   2.3. Formats of a sketch (e.g. Kaya Yanar)
3. Doing culture – overdoing culture
4. Constructions of a public identity
5. Ingroup/ outgroup in humor
Entertainment is an important tool for shaping perceptions of the world in a payful way and can encourage social integration (...). It is most effective when a group itself expresses its own humor.
• One of the more famous sketches featured the cast "going out for an English" after a few lhassis. They mispronounce the waiter's name, order the blandest thing from the menu (apart from one of them, who opts for the safer option of a curry) and ask for 24 portions of chips. This parodies the often-drunk English people "going out for an Indian", ordering chicken phall and to many papadums. This sketch was recently voted the 6th Greatest Comedy Sketch.

• The cast casually drop Punjabi and Hindi/Urdu slang phrases into their speech, in the manner of many British Asians living in the UK. (Wikipedia 2008)
Knobi Bonbon 1997

• VORSICHT. FRISCH INTEGRIERT!
• Careful. Freshly integrated!

(Texte: S.Dikmen, M.Omurca, R.Milde)

• Der "integrierte" Türke verzichtet auf Knoblauch und schluckt statt dessen geruchlose Knoblauchpillen, auch "Knobi-Bonbons" genannt, er grüßt seine Nachbarn nicht orientalisch-gefühlsduselig, sondern klipp und klar, kurz und knapp und ökonomisch: "Morgn!"
Kaya Yanar
SHAZIA MIRZA

fun

‘Clever, groundbreaking and very funny’

‘Hilarious’

‘Rave Reviews’

Thursday 8th Feb

Thursday 15th Feb

Saturday 17th Feb

Friday 22nd Feb

Saturday 10th March

Friday 16th March

Thursday 22nd March

Tuesday 27th March

Friday 19th March

Saturday 7th April

Wednesday 18th April

Friday 10th April

Friday 11th May

Sunday 17th May

Saturday 2nd June

Thursday 31st June

BARTMOUTH FESTIVAL

LEICESTER PHOENIX ARTS

BASINGSTOKE FORGE AT ARVIL

WINDSOR ARTS CENTRE

LEEDS CITY VARITIES

CANTERBURY GULBENKIAN

SHEFFIELD MEMORIAL HALL

NORWICH ARTS CENTRE

CHELTENHAM PILLAR ROOM

BRENT ASSEMBLY

COLCHESTER ARTS CENTRE

EDMONTON MILLFIELD THEATRE

ALDERSHOT WEST END CENTRE

WYCOMBE TOWN HALL

COVENTRY WARWICK ARTS CENTRE

HAIDERHEAD NORDEN FARM

TUNBRIDGE WELLS TRINITY THEATRE

FARINHAM ASHcroft ARTS
Fiacra Gibbons met Shazia Mirza

Guardian 2003, August 21

• "These men who tell my dad that it is totally unacceptable are the biggest hypocrites. Because [they] are the men who go smoking, drinking and sleeping with prostitutes."

• So did her family try to stop her? "My father told me to stop doing these 'stupid things' and get married. But he knows he can no longer control me, so he has stopped talking about it. Now he tells them I'm doing research, or that it's only a hobby."
Sacha Baron Cohen
Borat

Subtitled *Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, the film *Borat* is a „mockumentary comedy“. Borat's Kazakhstani villages were actually filmed in an impoverished Roma (gypsy) village of Glod, Romania. *USA Today* reports that poverty-stricken villagers were offered between $3.30 and $5.50 to bring animals into their houses and perform other acts some critics called humiliating.
Some representatives of Ethno-Comedy

Knobi Bonbon, D
Django Asül, D
Mundstuhl, D
Erkan&Stefan, D
Ciro de Luca, Au
Unkürrekt, Au
Shazia Mirza, E
Goodness gracious me, E
Sasha Baron Cohen, E
Bülent Ceylan, D
Murat Topal, D
Pamuks Kümmel Klub, D
Lilia Tetslau, D
Nursel Köse und das Kabarett „Die Bodenkosmetikerinnen“, D
Dieudonné M’Bala M’Bala, F
Kaya Yanar
Ethno-comedy very often alludes to typically German sorts of cultural knowledge:

Language Play

• Aktion Sorgenrind  (campaign for cattle with problems)
• Aktion Sorgenkind  (campaign for children with problems)

Suleyman  Suleymann-Suleydog
The cop of Tölz/The turk of Tölz
Bülent Ceylan, Mannheim

Word plays in the titles of the programs

• Kebabbel net, 2008
• Halb getürkt, 2006
• Döner for one, 2003
• Produzier' mich net! 2000
• **Kebabbel net**
  Kebab - „babbeln“ (to talk in Mannheim dialect)
• **Halb getürkt** - half faked („türken“ = to fake)
• **Döner for one**  (Dinner for one)
• **Produzier' mich net!** (Provozier mich nicht – do not provoke me)
Murat Topal

Getürkte Fälle
EIN COP PACKT AUS
Schleierhaft – incomprehensible
In Schleierhaft - in prison of veils
Hakan’s ethnolect:

- Imperatives in the form of the interrogative sentence: **rufst du an, kommst du her**
- Overuse of discourse markers like: da tut der (.) DAUernd zu mir RÜberblinzelnF VERSTEHs du; i SCHWÖRS; ey
- Inappropriate cases (datives): **dem Arsch machen wir platt**
- Coronalization of /ç/ as [∫]; ("isch" instead of "ich"; Frankfurter regiolect -> has spread beyond the region and has become a general characteristic of the sociolect.)
- Occasionally the ending /rl/ is not vocalized (macht weiter) or respectively apically spoken in initial sound clusters, i.e., lingual r (e.g., in the word *Training*),
- Shortening of long vowels (as in [zon] for "Sohn")
- Initial sound clusters of the /ts/ type are reduced to /s/. ("swei" instead of "zwei"; "su" instead of "zu")
- Syllable counting rhythm (among others non-reduction of secondary syllables)
- Omission of articles:
  - "isch kam **von trAlning** damals,"
  - "**alter** war schon (.) DREISsig oder so,"
- Prepositions (in prepositional phrases those of the direction and place) are omitted, usually together with the article:
  - „*warn me unten theAterplatz.*"
  - „**der is sofort nächste haltestelle RAUSgestiegen**“
- Other prepositions and local adverbs/prefixes are used than in Standard German:
  - „**der is sofort nächste haltestelle RAUSgestiegen**“ (instead of: ausgestiegen)
Suleymann

„Was geht oder geht nix.“ Line 6 below

Turkish music

1 S: hallo folks. íts me. Suleymann.

• 2 hallo folks, here is again talk radio Suleymann.
• 3 today from temporary studio,
• 4 naturally with my best friend Suleydog.
• 5 Suleydog come here.
• 6 well first caller. what goes on or goes nothing.
• 7 W: yeah, here is again constable Zöllner.
• 8 with whom do i speak?
S: eh, well yeah na
W: so herr yanar. have you seen the suspect in the meantime?
S: just listen, i do not believe that it is this Suleymann?
S: eh, just listen, i do not believe that it is this suleymann. no crook looks like that.
W: herr yanar, i don't need any suppositions, i need facts.
S: eh, okay, okay, i will see about it.
next caller. What goes on or goes nothing.
C: here is claudia from cologne.
C: i'm a compulsive cleaner.
S: one does not notice that in your city though.
C: but of course just at home.
and now my husband is also gone.
S: have you already looked in the non-recyclable trash?
C: noooo he is not there. actually i don't miss him anyway.
Doing culture/Overdoing culture

Without going into further detail, here again the most important distinction:

• **The level of the general**: It is part of human nature to acquire cultural characteristics (Plessner 1941/1961). Every form of behavior is necessarily in part culturally imprinted.

• **The level of the particular**: Culture is communicated as specific, as a frame that one asserts for oneself or others. Culturality can be brought into the foreground of interaction.

Ethno-comedy works on the level of the particular. Comedians have to parody elements of music, gestures, facial expressions, interior design, clothing, speech and behavioral codes that we can immediately classify.
Yanar in Subway Magazin (2001):

- "My type of humor is different. With the impersonations I slip into, I already aim for authenticity. Naturally I play with clichés, otherwise it would not be funny, but the whole is still so authentic because I myself am half Arab, half Turk. And I don't exhaust any figure, but rather jump from one role to the next. There is a constant shifting among Italians, Arabs, Germans, Indians, and that thus produces such a humorous conglomerate."
„People construct identities out of specific configurations of semiotic resources, and, consequently, just as linguistic and semiotic repertoires are conditioned by dynamics of access, identity repertoires will likewise be conditioned by unequal forms of access to particular identity-building resources. And similar differences between the relative value of resources will apply: status identities will require status resources, the kind of resources associated with mobility, the capacity to perform functions across contexts.“
Factors which play a role for the acceptance of risky, transcultural humor

• Long-term solidarity with the figures joked about
• Figures performed with sympathy
• High quality of performance
• The costs/butts of the jokes have to be distributed among many ethnicities
• Integration of humor at one’s own expense
• Legitimazation of risky humor is negotiated within a discourse history (instead of being bound to essentialist concepts such as same nation/ethnicity or the like)
References:

- Dirim, Inci/Auer, Peter (2004): Türkisch sprechen nicht nur die Türken- Über die Unschärfebeziehung zwischen Sprache und Ethnie in Deutschland, Berlin: de Gruyter.
Serdar Somuncu