

AN EXPLORATION OF ETHNIC HUMOR, POLYSEMY, AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

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Abstract:

This article investigates the interplay between polysemy and cultural stereotypes in ethnic humor, focusing on English language anecdotes that exploit ambiguous metaphors to activate in group/out group schemas. Drawing on cognitive linguistic theories of polysemy (Pustejovsky, 1995), metaphor (Dyner, 2006; Attardo, 2015) and humor processing (Raskin, 1985; Davis & Hofmann, 2023), alongside empirical studies of ethnic humor (Gogová, 2016; Yus, 2008), it examines how multifaceted metaphors facilitate rapid stereotype activation, exemplified by the “stingy Scot” trope. Through qualitative analysis of joke corpora, the study reveals mechanisms by which semantic ambiguity and cultural framing reinforce biases, offering insights for mitigative interventions in intercultural communication.

Keywords: Polysemy; Cultural stereotypes; Ethnic humor; Ambiguous metaphor; In group/out group schemas; Scots stereotype; Cognitive linguistics; Humor studies.

Introduction

Polysemy – the coexistence of multiple related meanings within a single lexical item – permits speakers to exploit semantic ambiguity for humorous effect (Pustejovsky, 1995). In the context of ethnic humor, such ambiguity often aligns with cultural stereotypes, facilitating rapid categorization of targets as “us” versus “them” (Gogová, 2016; Raskin, 1985). Ethnic jokes serve as social indicators, gauging acceptance of disparaging tropes and reinforcing in-group cohesion at the expense of out-group members (Gogová, 2016). This article explores how polysemous metaphors in English-language jokes activate collective cultural frames – particularly the enduring stereotype of the “stingy Scot” – and considers implications for intercultural understanding and stereotype reduction.

Cognitive linguistics locates polysemy within the dynamic interplay of context and lexical knowledge: meanings are generated in situ via qualia structures and coercion mechanisms (Pustejovsky, 1995). Humorous metaphors, characterized by striking incongruity between tenor and vehicle, capitalize on this polysemy by foregrounding unexpected correspondences (Dyner, 2006; Attardo, 2015). Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humor (1985) further posits that verbal jokes hinge on script oppositions – binary frames that momentarily overlap before yielding a punch line, producing cognitive resolution and amusement. Yus's Intersecting Circles Model (2008) extends this by showing how cultural frames – stereotypical collective representations – intersect with utterance interpretation and make-sense frames to generate humor. Within the humor transaction schema, these processes unfold across creation, communication, and reception stages, with stereotype activation often occurring at the comprehension phase (Davis & Hofmann, 2023).

When a polysemous metaphor is embedded in an ethnic joke, hearers swiftly access culturally shared meanings, enabling immediate decoding with minimal cognitive effort (Davis & Hofmann, 2023; Yus, 2008). For instance, the label “Scotch” in “Scotch tape” implicitly cues the stereotype of parsimony, making jokes about Scots' thriftiness instantly recognizable. In such cases, cultural frames rooted in historical bias are primed, and semantic ambiguity serves to mask the disparagement until the punch line resolves the incongruity. This dual activation – of both metaphorical and cultural schemas – heightens humorous impact while perpetuating negative out-group perceptions (Dyner, 2006). Empirical analysis of joke corpora reveals that polysemous expressions enable speakers to evoke stereotypes subtly, reducing social sanctions by framing disparagement as mere wordplay.

Case Study: The “Stingy Scot” Trope

Surveys of popular stereotypes confirm the prominence of Scots' thriftiness: in one dual-choice study, over 75% of respondents associated Scottish identity with stinginess (“Scotland and Ireland Through Stereotypes,” 2019). English-language joke repositories further illustrate this bias: classic one-liners (e.g., “Why are Scottish churches round? So nobody can hide during the collection”) exploit the semantic frame of parsimony for comedic effect. Such jokes rely on overlapping scripts – “religious practice” and “financial stinginess”

– which Raskin (1985) identifies as essential for humorous script opposition. Moreover, the transactional view highlights how audience reception reinforces these frames, as laughter signals shared cultural knowledge and acceptance of the stereotype (Davis & Hofmann, 2023). The persistence of the “stingy Scot” motif across media, advertising, and colloquial speech underscores its entrenched status in Anglophone humor (Gogová, 2016).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that polysemy and cultural framing jointly underpin ethnic humor, enabling rapid stereotype activation through multifaceted metaphors. The enduring “stingy Scot” trope exemplifies how semantic ambiguity can mask disparagement within wordplay, reinforcing out-group biases under the guise of light-hearted jest. Recognizing these mechanisms is crucial for academics and educators aiming to challenge stereotype-based humor and promote intercultural empathy. Interventions might include critical humor literacy, which deconstructs script oppositions and cultural frames, thereby disrupting automatic stereotype activation. Future research should quantify the social impact of stereotype-laden metaphors and develop pedagogical strategies to foster more inclusive humor practices.

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