

Inter-/Intra-Ethnic Group Linguistic Humour:
A Slovene Example.¹

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Slovenes are one of a number of Slavic immigrant groups found in the industrial Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States. These North American Slovenes originated from what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire and what has since become Yugoslavia during the first waves of migration between 1880 and 1920. Their northerly segment of about two million Slovene speakers within the Yugoslav federation has long since been politicized from membership in the post-World War I Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes into the Federated Republic of Slovenia. Those who migrated have not always directly participated in socio-political developments in the star kraj ('old country'), but nevertheless maintain strong feelings of ethnic identity.

The Slovenes are predominantly Catholic, highly literate, and their contribution to the industrial economy far outstrips their relative size geographically and numerically. It is difficult not to be impressed by the feat of Slovenia's survival as an ethnic unit in the middle of the changing Eastern European political scene, especially when one considers that they were bounded by powerful and expanding neighbours like the Germans, Austrians, Italians, and Hungarians. Such neighbours were always

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numerically superior to the Slovenes, sometimes by many times over and in past times such groups often held under their complete sway the little Slovene provinces, and to some degree still do. For example, as a result of faulty post-war partitioning, Slovene minorities are still to be found in Italy, Hungary, and Austria, with by far the largest number in the latter country's southern provinces. It is interesting to note that some of the same humor mechanisms used to bolster ethnicity in the Old World find reflections in the North American Slovenes' attempt to maintain ethnicity in a heterogeneous English-speaking dominant culture populated by other immigrant subcultures, some of which were familiar ones from the European scene.

There have been several large waves of migration by the Slovenes — one around the turn of the century, another in the period after World War I, and the last one after World War II. Slovenes migrated in large numbers for their relatively small population, travelling to such diverse places as Australia, Argentina, Canada, and most especially, to the United States. To many, their most noticeable presence has been in the Great Lakes industrial region, and it is in Cleveland, Ohio, that their contributions have been most obvious. But they are now a disappearing breed, these Ameriški Slovenci, and of the many literary organs published in the past by the American Slovenes — namely, the Amerikanski Slovenec, 'The American Slovene', the Glas Naroda, 'Voice of the People', the Narodni Vestnik, 'Folk News', the Proletarec, the 'Worker', the Slovenski Narod, the 'Slovene People', the Ameriška Domovina, 'The American Home', and the Prosveta, 'The Enlightenment', only the Cleveland-based Ameriška Domovina continues on with a dwindling readership.

For a time the community was stable, and many Slovenes

managed to keep their mother tongue and ethnic identity intact by establishing and maintaining neighbourhoods, parishes, or small communities along ethnic lines. (This paper is based on one of those small communities on the East Side of Cleveland, Ohio, and the data herein presented is derived from immigrant villagers who arrived just after the first war.) With time, younger generations, as is typical with most immigrant groups in North America, break their ethnic and linguistic ties with the older culture, moving out to find a place in the larger North American society. As with the other small immigrant groups in North America, the problem of adjustment and assimilation was not exclusively one of meeting the dominant society head-on, but also one of meeting and co-existing with a number of other ethnic subcultures. Some of these subcultures were familiar from the Old World and some of the pressures to preserve ethnicity in the face of these other larger and more often more important immigrant subcultures reasserted themselves in the retention or refurbishing of the humor surrounding such groups. Obviously, the investigation of ethnic linguistic humor leads to a clearer picture of the respective share of various ethnic elements in the shaping of North American culture, as well as a clearer picture of their own self-concepts during the active period of their assimilation into that culture.

One cannot help but be fascinated by the general manner and frequency of linguistic play in Slovene, and its participation in the humor tradition itself. There are several humor themes which occur with some regularity in post-World War I immigrant Slovene folklore and it is interesting to contrast two of these as a measure of inter-group and intra-group perceptions. There are, for example, short humorous stories about an anonymous wandering inhabitant of the Slovene town of Ribnica. The Ribenčan is a

Slovene Charlie Brown — he never gets things straight and fortune never smiles on him. But the Ribenčan, no matter what happens to him, is always a Slovene. Another set of humorous stories deal with outsiders, often other groups with whom the Slovenes have shared or disputed political, cultural, and geographical ties. Such tales are not only interesting in themselves, but the linguistic treatment of in-group as opposed to out-group is informative of Slovenes' perceptions of themselves as a cohesive, unified ethnic group.

The Ribenčan is the protagonist of countless 'numbskull stories', all designed to point up the cultural and intellectual superiority of the teller's own community in comparison to the sad state of Ribnica affairs. In times past, the Ribenčan played an important part in village economies by peddling wooden utensils, pottery, and weavings in exchange for winter provisions like corn, wheat, barley, oats and potatoes. Travelling from village to village, from a very early time he was known far and wide, and his own eccentricities of speech and behaviour became far better known than the more extreme habits of others who had simply never travelled at all. It was not that he was so very different from the other communities; he was simply better known.

The numerous tales which deal with the exploits of the villagers of Ribnica are to a one humorously, but never morally, laid out. They are seldom vicious, rarely sarcastic, simply teasing and pleasantly humorous. They usually reflect on some minor weakness of mankind as personified in the Ribenčan or specifically on some minor weakness of the Ribenčan himself. What is incredible is that one finds such Ribenčan tales told even in small farming villages of no more than a dozen houses — like Vas Ratje, which has no bus and until recently did not even appear on government maps. Ribnica

itself is not the major urban centre, but it is reasonably sized!

Ribnica tales usually follow along the vein exhibited in the following examples.

Six Ribenčani were in the army in the north, assigned to the cannons. During the heat of the battle they found an ornamental cannon made of ceramic and loaded it up for firing.

"Ready! Aim! Fire!"

When the smoke had cleared, the six were no more. Only one Ribenčan was left, and he could only weakly gasp,

"My God, what a cannon! Just think, even here five were killed; you can only imagine what it was like where the charge fell!"

One day a Ribenčan was walking down the street in Ljubljana enjoying the sights. Unbeknownst to him, a lady who had been cleaning the upper-story windows had slipped and fallen to the ground right at his feet. He was utterly dumbfounded at the sight, and could hardly contain himself until he got home again. He excitedly told all his friends of what happened.

"Friends, you'd never believe it! In Ljubljana there are such fine women. And they just throw them away if they're no good anymore. Why, just at my feet fell one that someone had tossed right out the window. Imagine! Here at least we keep them for working in the fields, but there they just toss them right out the window."

There are some Ribenčan tales which also make use of linguistic play as the central theme. But those never poke fun at the Ribenčan's eccentric speech patterns from a dialectal point of view, although comments on the dialectal idiosyncracies of Slovene speech forms are head in conventional speech. Rather, they usually deal with his coming out on the wrong side of linguistically defined ambiguities. For example, one story runs as follows.

One day a Ribenčan was driving a wagon into town, and as he went along, he was daydreaming of the lottery, saying to himself,

"God grant that I hit it just right! God grant that I hit it just right this time!"

And sure enough, he hit it just right — he collided with a milestone by the side of the road.

This tale is obviously based on the play on words allowed by the polysemy inherent in the verb zadeti, which can mean variously "to hit (the mark); to win (a prize); to meet with an accident; to go well for one." Unfortunately for our Ribenčan protagonist, the intended meaning of "Oh, let me hit it this time!", speaking of the winning number in the lottery, was realized as "Oh, let me hit it!", in the manner of striking or colliding with something. As the Ribenčan asks fervently, Bog daj da bi dobro zadenil ... dobro zadenil ..., "God grant that I hit it just right ... that I hit it just right ..." And he does indeed zadenil, but not in the sense he had intended. Pa je res zadenil, 'He hit it all right'; 'he ran right into a milestone by the side of the road', ... pa res je zadenil noter en kanton, pa je dober zadenil.

A similar tale runs as follows:

On his way to market the Ribenčan kept praying out loud,

"Oh dear God, I hope I'm the only one there at the fair. Oh, how I hope I'm the only one there!"

Of course, what he intended was his being the only vendor with this particular kind of goods to sell — but he did indeed count on there being lots of customers there to sell his wares to.

He travelled for days and days, and when he did finally arrive at the market-fair, sure enough if he wasn't the only one there after all. He asked a passerby where everyone was for the fair. The passerby replied,

"Why, the fair was held yesterday. Don't you know you're a day late? Why, you must be the only one here."

And the Ribenčan thought to himself,

"Well, I did want to be the only one here, didn't I?"

Other groups are not given quite the same treatment. Slovenia is bordered by Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia, and has been variously under the political and cultural reachers of Italic, Germanic, and less so the Gallic and Turkic spheres of influence. Slovene was also spoken far more widely than it is now, extending into parts of Croatian Pannonia in the south and into upper Austria. For example, upper Styria (Štajersko) was in effect a Slovene-speaking province in the Austro-Hungarian empire. There are still minorities of Slovene-speaking inhabitants in neighbouring areas in northern Italy; for example Trieste (Trst) has both Slovene and

Italian speakers and the Italian Soča River Valley is sprinkled with Slovenes. In lower Austria, Klagenfurt (Celovec) was a Germanic-speaking urban centre in a Slovene-speaking countryside.

One result of this geographical spread is that those areas in which bilingualism and language contact are common have probably added to the variety of speech forms in Slovene itself. Slovene spoken in these areas has taken on some phonological and lexical characteristics of the dominant language in the area. Soča Valley speakers, for example, are characterized by intonation and stress cadences similar to northern Italian. Some speech forms in Austrian territory and on the present Slovene side of the boundaries exhibit Germanic characteristics, from past historical as well as continuing contact. Maribor, for example, once a German urban centre on the Drava River, but repopulated from the surrounding Slovene countryside after the establishment of Yugoslavia in the years following the first war, shows some distinctively Germanic influences.

However, it is noteworthy that among this group of immigrant Slovenes such Slovene constituencies are not typically singled out for humor of the linguistic kind, even though dialectically they are somewhat removed from any given dialect on the linguistic continuum. But those other ethnic groups (whose speech may have even influenced such variation) are often singled out in terms of their speech patterns or their cultural patterns. Ribnica speakers, for example, are not typically singled out for such characteristics, they simply occupy the position of protagonist in humorous tales revolving about their misfortunes. There is little question that such dialect differences were well-recognized. For example, Josip Jurčič in his novel Rokovnjači, serialized in the first volume of the Ljubljanski Zvon of 1881, puts the following words in the mouth

of his famous blusterer Blaž Mozol:

"Oh kod? Tam iz Štajerskega od nekod. Ne vem več, kako se pravi. Ali to je čudno, ali ni čudno? Ljubi moj Rajtguzen, da kadar govori, takó govori, kakor mi govorimo, le malo bolj zivija kakor naši poljci doli. Ne zavija pa takó, kakor sem slišal, ko sem enkrat z ranjco svojo materjo na Štajersko na božjo pot šel, v Gornji grad, kaj misliš ti, Rajtguzen? Vidiš ti zmirom po Obloški zavijaš, tako nekako po Ribniški 'nájsem-nájsem'. A ta naš Nande, ki bi rad pri mojej sestri zet bil, nič ne zavija po štajerski."

"From where? There in Štajersko somewhere. I don't know any more, as they say. But isn't it strange, my dear Rajtguzen, that when he talks, he talks like we talk, even if he does twist it a bit like the flatlanders. He doesn't twist (his speech) the way I heard it when I went to Štajersko, to Gornji grad, with my mother on a pilgrimage once. What do you think, Rajtguzen? See, you always talk in the Obloški style, sort of like the Ribniški (Ribnica) 'I'm not-I'm not'. But this Nande of ours, who wants to be my sister's son-in-law, doesn't talk in the Štajerski fashion at all."

Non-Slovene groups do, however, occupy more central positions in stories involving linguistic characteristics. An excellent example of this is offered by the following treatment of Croatian, another south Slavic language close enough to constitute a separate sub-grouping with Slovene (especially true of those northwestern varieties of Croatian termed kajkavian). Standard

Slovene is derived from Ljubljana, the political and cultural centre of Slovenia, but Ljubljana Slovene is actually based on Dolenjsko and Gorenjsko speech, two separately defined dialects, and more or less straddles the boundary between them. Even this standard shares a large quotient of mutual intelligibility with the Zagreb standard for northern kajkavian Croatian, and obviously, those immediately adjacent dialects on either side of the linguistic border offer an even greater continuum of similarities. Ribnica, incidentally, is not far from the boundaries, but it is the Croat who figures prominently in humorous tales dealing not with his misfortunes and adventures alone, but with his speech patterns in arriving at these. The point of the tale is not entirely his misfortune, his ineptness, his hard luck (as it is with the Ribenčan); it also employs the differences in his speech patterns as a central point in the humor of the story.

Slovenes have long chafed at the numerical superiority of their southern neighbours, the Croats. Slovenia, being directly under the Germanic-speaking pre-World War I Austro-Hungarian Empire was industrially developed from an early time, and continues to this day to enjoy a position of technological superiority over its sister republics in the Federation. Ljubljana (Laibach) is on the main rail line which went from inland to the sea at Trieste and Fiume. The following example is likely some veiled reference to this fact and both real and imagined Slovene technological superiority.

One day a Croat was visiting Ljubljana, and there happened to see a train on the track. He was amazed at this, never having seen one before, and could hardly contain his excitement at the sight. When he returned home, he told all of his friends of the strange sight,

saying,

"You know, I saw a wondrous thing in Ljubljana.
There I saw a strange and wonderful machine,
which farts a little,
stinks a little,
and goes like the devil himself."

In Slovene, the tone of the tale is carried by the language itself. The teller inserts a few apparent Croat, or Croat-like, usages into the idiom, and the tale proceeds on this basis. Thus, the original stanza has the following.

"Znaš, šta sem videl,
To véliko črno mrcino;
Pa to malo pa prđi,
Malo pa smrđi,
Pa ide ko vrag."

Note the underlined elements. The Croat-like forms vrag for Slovene hudič 'devil', znaš for veš 'you (sing.) know', šta for kaj 'what', ide for gre 'it goes', and the stress change on velíko, prdí, and smrdí to véliko 'big', prđi 'it farts', and smrđi 'it stinks' complete the basis of the sentence.

The same kinds of jokes were created in the New World. For example, the following joke makes use of the same narrator strategies, i.e., adopting what appears to the listener to be Croatian linguistic features (but which may not in fact be!).

"Two Croats went to America. And when they got
to New York they saw a house with a sign on it, advertising

it FOR RENT. The one Croat said to the other,

"Glej no, to je kuća forent.

(Look, there's a house forent.)

A idemo napred.

(But let's go on a little further.)

Hoćemo dóbiti za bádeva."

(We're sure to get (the next one) for nothing.)

Besides the obvious play on supposed Croatian linguistic features, the tale also revolves about the Croats' misunderstanding of the word forent. At this time, what was commonly called a goldinar (see also Slov. for golinar dialectally) in Slovenian was forint in Croatian — a florin, about the equivalent of two Austrian crowns and used in Croatia until 1892. Besides this feature, the dialectal Slovene version would have been something like the following instead.

"Le no, tam je hiša 'for rent'.

Pa prjdemo še malo naprej.

Bomo dobili za nič.

What is equally interesting is that the Slovene narrator's supposed Croatian usages are often incorrect. Not the least among these is forent itself, which should be Croatian forint. Another good example is bádeva, which should be badáva with the stress on the second syllable (this, incidentally, is an archaic Turkish borrowing into Croatian and is unknown to most modern speakers).

It is interesting to note that the treatment accorded in-group fellow-members of what is perceived as the same linguistic and cultural continuum is not accorded outgroup individuals. In point of fact, the former may be relatively different on the linguistic

continuum, and perhaps for those on the geographical periphery, on the cultural continuum. But these are nevertheless considered in-group members on the same abstract language framework. One sees in such humor implicit dimensions of ethnicity, not surprising in the new world where one has often felt the need of preservation of such ethnicity. More stress is laid on seemingly large cultural and linguistic differences outside the group and less attention is paid to the seemingly minor cultural and linguistic differences within the group.

In conclusion, the attempt to preserve ethnic and linguistic identity is seen in two outlets for ethnic humor. One notes the minimal attention paid to language differences in humorous tales which have an easily-identified Slovene dialect group as protagonists and the maximal attention paid to language differences for a closely related but distinctive language group. In the first case, linguistic dissimilarities are not taken note of, while in the second linguistic similarities are very much taken note of. Inter-group and intra-group ethnic humor seems to support different themes, and this paper has offered Slovene examples of each.