



Humour and Verbal Irony in G.B. Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*

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Abstract. Relying on theories of irony relevant to our study, this paper investigates the humorous and ironic exchanges among the different ethnicity characters in the Shavian play *John Bull's Other Island*, focusing especially on the verbal encounters between the different ethnicity characters: the English protagonist Broadbent and the Irish one, Larry Doyle, but also on the sarcastic remarks of Father Keegan. The conversations that take place both in the English and the Irish milieu foreground the characters' real intentions and behavioural patterns. The findings of this paper also support our earlier assumption that through the two ambiguous ethnic stereotypes manifested here reversed roles are displayed.

Keywords: ethnic identity, verbal irony, stereotypes, reversal, Shaw

1. The aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to analyse the linguistic behaviour of the two protagonists of G.B. Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, displayed in the form of ethnic stereotypes. Therefore the stereotypical verbal manifestations of the English Thomas Broadbent and the Irish Larry Doyle, complemented by Father Keegan are investigated.

2. Relevant theories of irony

Verbal irony is a linguistic phenomenon exploiting the incongruity between reality and expectation and consequently, unveiling an attitude towards such an incongruity. It is very important to make a distinction between verbal irony and situational irony. According to Gibbs (1994: 363), “[b]oth verbal and situational irony involve a confrontation or juxtaposition of incompatibles, but in verbal irony an individual presents or evokes such a confrontation by his or her utterance(s), whereas situational irony is something that just happens to be noticed as ironic”. Both verbal and situational irony employ incongruity in order to distinguish between facts and expectations (saying one thing and meaning another) while keeping in mind the audience’s (reader’s) awareness of both. While situational irony foregrounds events which appear as ironic regardless of the speaker’s intention, in the case of verbal irony the speaker creates a juxtaposition of incompatible actions or words with a view to conveying an attitude.

From the many recent views on irony processing we will consider those, which are of interest for our purpose. Both views maintain that irony presupposes a two-stage processing: first, the processing of a meaning of a specific utterance is rejected, and, second, a reinterpretation of the utterance through inferring an implicature is triggered.

One of these views is based on Grice’s Cooperation Principle and its maxims. In Grice’s view, irony is a case of conversational implicature. By blatantly violating the Maxim of Quality (‘Do not say what you believe to be false’), the speaker implies the opposite of what is said. The ironist says something s/he does not believe to be true, although it is not in his/her intention to tell a lie. The intention conveyed by the ironist’s implicature urges the hearer to look for an additional meaning. The addressee feels inclined to reject the literal meaning and to subsequently decipher the implied meaning, highly likely to “be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward” (Grice 1989: 34). In a later study¹, Grice broadens the definition of irony by incorporating the notion of an attitude into it: “To be ironical is among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests) and while one wants the pretence to be recognized as such, to announce it as pretence would spoil the effect.” (ibid. 54) In this line, irony is recognized as a verbal resource meant to convey an evaluative position on the part of the speaker.

Later, two post-Gricean attempts have been forwarded to provide a rationale for irony. One approach (Wilson & Sperber 1992, Wilson 2006) treats verbal irony as a type of *echoic allusion* to an attributed utterance or thought. According to this view, the speaker *interprets* an earlier thought or utterance, uses an utterance interpretively

¹ Further Notes on Logic and Conversation, in: Grice 1989: 41-58.

(see Relevance Theory in Sperber and Wilson 1986). She “is expressing her own reaction to a thought or utterance with a similar content which she tacitly attributes to someone else (or to herself at another time), and which she wants to suggest is ludicrously false, inadequate or inappropriate”. (Wilson 2006: 1724) The aim of such a reaction is to express a critical or mocking attitude to such a false utterance and it actually dissociates the speaker from this tacitly attributed utterance.

The second post-Gricean approach is suggested by the etymology of the word² ‘irony’ and treats verbal irony as a type of pretence. According to this approach, the speaker is not asserting but merely pretending to assert a proposition, and expects his/her audience to see through the pretence and recognise the critical or mocking attitude behind it. (Wilson 2006: 1725)

Brown and Levinson (1987) deal with irony as a form of off-record politeness strategy, an indirect face-threatening act, along with joking and humour, the latter being positive politeness strategies with claim common ground with the interlocutor. Through irony it is possible to show aggression towards the victim of irony, but the use of irony means mitigated aggression.

In our analyses, we will adopt both the echoic and the pretence theory of irony, blended with the off-record politeness theory because these are the attitudes which account for the natural, “in-born”, stereotypical state of mind of the English as an ethnic community (cf. “the Importance of Not Being Earnest rule”³, Fox 2005). This idea is emphasised elsewhere (Anolli, Infantino, Ciceri 2001) as well, foregrounding that

ironic communication finds its edge in those cultures (like the Anglo-Saxon one) where self-control is very important and where it is thus a very positive thing to be able to keep coolly detached from event, without emotional arousal. In this way, a speaker can use irony to hide the expression of his/her emotions and safeguard his/her personal experience. (...) In English culture, where one talks about emotions in preference to showing them, (...) irony becomes not only a device to keep at distance from emotions and ‘de-

² The etymology of the word itself means pretence. The word ‘irony’ derives from Greek *eirōneia* (cf. also Latin: *ironia*), which means “simulated ignorance”, “the pretence of ignorance”. The Greek term *eironia* describes the main characteristic of the stock characters (the “ironic man”) in early Greek comedies. Source: Glottopedia, accessed 10.04.2010.

³ Kate Fox calls this pervading attitude “the Importance of Not Being Earnest rule”, alluding to Oscar Wilde’s celebrated comedy. This rule refers to the major distinction between “serious” and “solemn”, between “sincerity” and “earnestness”. According to Fox, “seriousness is acceptable, solemnity is prohibited. Sincerity is allowed, earnestness is strictly forbidden. Pomposity and self-importance are outlawed. Serious matters can be spoken of seriously, but one must never take oneself too seriously. The ability to laugh at ourselves, although it may be rooted in a form of arrogance, is one of the more endearing characteristics of the English.” (Fox 2005: 62) Similarly, “irony is the dominant ingredient in English humour”, it is “endemic: a constant, a given, a normal element of ordinary everyday conversation” (ibid. 65-66).

emotionalize' oneself, but also a way of showing consideration for the interlocutor's feelings, in order to be polite ... (ibid. 148).

However, it must be stated that whatever theory would be adopted, what is common in any analysis of ironic utterances is that irony is linked to the expression of a certain type of derogatory, hostile or contemptuous attitude and this perfectly suits the Shavian outlook.

3. Hypothesis

As it has been claimed by literature, initiators of humorous and ironic dialogues are usually acknowledged to occupy higher hierarchical positions and to feel entitled to exert control over the interaction (Coser 1960 in Kotthoff 2006). *John Bull's Other Island* is, however, a different case. There are two main characters in the play, of equal social rank: Thomas Broadbent, a faithful descendant of John Bull⁴, and his Irish counterpart, Larry Doyle. On the surface, according to the stereotypical image the reader / audience would expect based on their ethnicity, Broadbent is supposed to be the rational, cold-blooded gentleman, common-sensical and having a particular sense of humour (English humour); while Doyle should be the passionate dreamer, lover of freedom and independence, and having no sense of humour whatsoever.

In actual fact, what can be witnessed here is exactly the opposite: reversed roles and ambiguous stereotypes⁵. It is Broadbent who is overwhelmed by sentimentalism and displays a passionate love for Nora Reilly, the Irish heiress; and Doyle is the character with common sense, reasonable and it is him who tries to bring Broadbent down to earth, to reality.

4. The paradoxical English stereotype

According to Shaw's description, Broadbent is "*a robust, full-blooded, energetic man in the prime of life, sometimes eager and credulous, sometimes shrewd and roguish, sometimes portentously solemn, sometimes jolly and impetuous, always buoyant and irresistible, mostly likeable, and enormously absurd in his most earnest moments*". (p. 67). His name (Broad-bent), however, which he proudly bears, is in sharp contrast with his real personality. He calls himself a liberal but he is quite conservative and narrow-minded: he tries to be humorous ('I have a strong sense of humor which sometimes makes people doubt

⁴ John Bull is a leading character in satirical pamphlets, first published separately and later as a book entitled *The History of John Bull* (1712), by John Arbuthnot (1667-1735) that has come to personify the English nation.

⁵ See my earlier study on stereotype ambiguity in Ajtony (2010).

whether I am quite serious.’ 147) but does not understand Irish humour and misunderstands irony. These features distance him from the English stereotype.

- (1) KEEGAN. There is a saying in the Scripture which runs – so far as the memory of an oldish man can carry the words – Let not the right side of your brain know what the left side doeth. I learnt at Oxford that this is the secret of the Englishman’s strange power of making the best of two worlds.
 BROADBENT. Surely the text refers to our right and left hands. I am somewhat surprised to hear a member of your Church quote so essentially Protestant a document as the Bible; but at least you might quote it accurately.
 LARRY. Tom: with the best intentions youre making an ass of yourself. You dont understand Mr. Keegan’s peculiar vein of humor.
 BROADBENT (*instantly recovering his confidence*). Ah! it was only your delightful Irish humor, Mr. Keegan. Of course, of course. How stupid of me! I’m so sorry. (*He pats Keegan consolingly on the back*). John Bull’s wits are still slow, you see. (p. 137)⁶

Broadbent’s humble intention is to correct the Irishman’s interpretation of the Bible and expresses his disappointment that the priest cannot quote a well-known line exactly. His calling the Bible ‘an essentially Protestant document’ has a humorous effect. This attitude is probably due to his ethnical bias: he acts as a typical Englishman who views the world according to his British (Anglocentric) mentality monopolizing even the Bible to his Protestant church. At this point his friend, the Irish Larry Doyle interferes but this time the interruption must be interpreted as a sign of solidarity. He goes bald on record, uses an impolite set formula (‘Youre making an ass of yourself’) with a hedge, though, in order to mitigate his imposition. But with this direct FTA (face-threatening act) he actually saves his friend’s face from an even greater face-loss in front of the foreigner, the Irish priest. Doyle draws Broadbent’s attention to the fact that he is actually being mocked at and called a hypocrite. He does not feel offended at all, but admits his disability to recognise Irish humour.

In another conversation, Keegan and Broadbent discuss their world-views but – perhaps due to their different ethnic background – there are no shared “mutual contextual beliefs”, which hinder the correct interpretation of each other’s utterances (cf. Anolli, Infantiono, Ciceri 2001):

- (2) KEEGAN. You feel at home in the world, then?
 BROADBENT. Of course. Dont you?
 KEEGAN (*from the very depths of his nature*). No.

⁶ Page numbers refer to Shaw, G.B. ([1904], 1977) *John Bull’s Other Island*.

BROADBENT (breezily). Try phosphorus pills. I always take them when my brain is overworked. I'll give you the address in Oxford Street. (...) (p. 139)

This short exchange of words also betrays Broadbent's narrow-mindedness, misunderstanding the priest's question, which is actually inquiring about his interlocutor's attitude, psychological state of mind towards the world. As Keegan's irony does not leave clues for a correct interpretation, Broadbent's inference is wrong. He infers that Keegan was inquiring about his fatigue, which can be cured by taking pills. He is even extremely generous providing the source where these can be acquired.

5. The paradoxical Irish stereotype

For the definition of the Irish stereotype, we consider the work of Matthew Arnold, Shaw's contemporary, whose lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) had a formative influence on the Irish literary revival. He saw the Celtic psyche as "essentially feminine", ambiguously praising the Celts for their indifference to the "despotism of fact". In his view, they lacked common sense and steadfast powers of practical application, qualities he attributed to the Saxon (Welch (ed.) 1996: 21).

Paradoxically, humorous exchanges appear mostly in the Irish characters' utterances. Their teasing, banter and irony, which pervades their verbal behaviour in their face-to-face encounters, is a sign of solidarity against any out-group member, Broadbent included.

(3) CORNELIUS. (...) Here: take up them things and let me hear no more o your foolish lip. (*Patsy obeys*). You can take the sammin under your oxther. (*He wedges the salmon into Patsy's axilla*).

PATSY. I can take the goose too, sir. Put it on me back n gimme the neck of it in me mouth. (*Cornelius is about to comply thoughtlessly*).

AUNT JUDY (*feeling that Broadbent's presence demands special punctiliousness*). For shame, Patsy! to offer to take the goose in your mouth that we have to eat after you! (...)

PATSY. Arra what would a dead goose care for me mouth? (*He takes his load up the hill*). (p. 99)

Although both Cornelius and Aunt Judy are teasing Patsy Farrel, his ironic retorts betray a free spirit, who – though overwhelmed by the burdens of life (in its physical sense as well) – is still able to answer back, implying "this is too much already, can't you see?" But through this ironic remark he is able to save Cornelius's and Aunt Judy's, and redresses his own long-lost face.

At first, Cornelius does not understand the irony (he is about to comply “*thoughtlessly*”). The situation is about to be remedied by Aunt Judy, but who similarly misunderstands the implied meaning of Patsy’s words. She takes them literally, on face value and is scandalized by the farmer’s proposal to take the head of the goose in his mouth before offering it as a meal. Naturally, Patsy continues in the same line, but in this latter remark it is the goose, which should be offended for having been swallowed. This time he does not even expect an answer, he intends his question to be rhetorical, indicating that he accepts his role, as the servant of servants, with resignation and acts accordingly (“*He takes his load up the hill*”).

The Irish heiress, Nora Reilly also employs ironical remarks towards the English Broadbent. She has authority, being “at home”, while Broadbent, though he is the coloniser, assumes the role of the newcomer and the outsider, and Nora’s higher hierarchical position overrides the Englishman’s status:

- (4) BROADBENT (*suddenly betraying a condition of extreme sentimentality*).
 (...) The magic of this Irish scene, and – I really don’t want to be personal, Miss Reilly; but the charm of your Irish voice –
 NORA. Oh, get along with you, Mr Broadbent! Youre breaking your heart about me already, I daresay, after seeing me for two minutes in the dark.
 (p. 101)

In Nora’s reply irony emerges from her intention that her statement be inferred literally, so an ironic opposition can be found between the sentence meaning and the speaker meaning. The irony lies rather in the obvious, in the redundant: it is self-evident that nobody can fall in love with a woman after having met her for two minutes in the dark. The irony is emphasised by the hyperbole in the form of a personification (“*Youre breaking your heart...*”). However, Nora’s criticism seems to be face-saving: she does not attack Broadbent’s face directly, she also employs a hedge (“*I daresay*”) to mitigate the imposition of her utterance. It is rather the expression of criticism, which also allows for the possibility of a serious reply. Broadbent takes this chance but is retorted again with “bitter indifference”.

- (5) BROADBENT. I have looked forward to meeting you more than to anything else in Ireland.
 NORA (*ironically*). Dear me! did you now? (101)

Nora’s reply – this time – is an echo of Broadbent’s words. Irony as pretence can be witnessed here. She pretends to take the role of the English gentleman, but turning the meaning of the original sentence into its opposite.

While Nora's remarks contain irony blended with humour and therefore they represent milder attack and criticism towards her interlocutor's face, her fellow countryman, Larry Doyle's irony is much darker, even sarcastic. This strong critical attitude springs from his detachment from the "Irish issues", which gives him clear-sightedness and a sense of reality. Having been both physically and spiritually uprooted and detached from his home-country, he is able to rise above the petty conflicts of everyday Irish life. This gives him a "higher hierarchical position" and therefore he can employ ironic remarks, even bitter sarcasm in his interaction with his English partner and his Irish fellows.

Larry Doyle is a man of reason, the poet of Irish self-reflection. He can see through all foolish self-delusion and considers dreaming a destroyer of life. He even targets his irony against himself in an unusually passionate outbreak:

- (6) DOYLE: (...) Oh, the dreaming! the dreaming! the torturing, heartscalding, never satisfying dreaming (...)! An Irishman's imagination never lets him alone, never convinces him, never satisfies him; but it makes him that he cant face reality nor deal with it nor handle it nor conquer it (...) (p. 79)

In this remark he counter-argues his own statement in a conscious reflection. Ethnic ambivalence is detectable in the presence of both his Irish and English self in one utterance. While his Irish ego, which was hiding and almost forgotten in the two long decades spent in London, gives voice to a sincere patriotism and emotional attitude to life, his English self is the rational ego which clear-sightedly analyses and precisely formulates his sensible stance to his emotional side.

Similarly, feelings and emotions intermingle with rationality in his second sentence, as well. Dreaming and reality are the core concepts around which his utterance is structured. First of all, he speaks about himself as "an Irishman", in the third person singular, which implies that although being one himself, he is actually an outsider in Ireland. Moreover, the repetitive use of the adverb "never" followed by the enumeration of the disturbing effects of dreaming foreground the poetic function of his discourse, approaching him towards the Irish stereotype. The second part of his sentence continues the enumeration, this time repeating the word "nor", thus emphasising the idea of negation. The form of the utterance (through the enumerations and repetitions) implies an ever-increasing passion, i.e. the idea of limitless imagination; the content of the utterance, on the other hand, bears the implication of rationality, considering the tackled issue from several angles, in this way bringing arguments with the means of sense.

In the comparison of an Irishman's and an Englishman's industriousness, Larry points to the Irish peasants' useless toil in order to get some result as opposed to the Englishman's ability to attain achievements much easily:

(7) BROADBENT. Was he industrious? Thats remarkable, you know, in an Irishman.

LARRY. Industrious! That man's industry used to make me sick, even as a boy. I tell you, an Irish peasant's industry is not human: it's worse than the industry of a coral insect. An Englishman has some sense about working: he never does more than he can help – and hard enough to get him to do that without scamping it; but an Irishman will work as if he'd die the moment he stopped. (...)

BROADBENT. That was magnificent, you know. Only a great race is capable of producing such men.

LARRY. Such fools, you mean! What good was it to them? (p. 108-9)

Larry's ironic statement introduced by echoing Broadbent's adjective ("industrious") is an utterance that the speaker attributes to a clearly identifiable interlocutor. From this echoing bitter irony derives. The more he repeats (echoes) Broadbent's word (even if it is not an exact repetition, but a word class change: from the adjective "industrious" deriving the noun "industry"), the bitterer the irony in his utterance. The darkness of Larry's remark is emphasised by the adjectives with negative connotation (*sick, worse*) or positive adjectives preceded by negation (*not human*). The ironic attitude is also detectable in the comparison of the Irishman and the Englishman, the former appearing in the form of a metaphor with a degrading, contemptuous implication (*coral insect*). The metaphor refers to the Irishman as a static being, deprived of the capacity of thinking and the possibility for action, as opposed to the active, working Englishman. When characterising the Englishman, Larry employs action-verbs (*work, does, help*), while the Irishman's features are linked to non-action verbs (*die, stop*), implying static, passive attitude.

In the subsequent exchange, Broadbent tries to make Larry see his own ethnic group ("race") more positively, using adjectives and verbs with a positive, creative connotation (*magnificent, great, capable, producing*), but the Irishman turns the encouraging implication of Broadbent's words into their negative counterpart (*such men – such fools*), by echoing them with ironic tone (though the stage directions do not refer to the character's tone of voice, the ironic overtone is obvious from the context). Larry's interpretively used utterance (*such fools*) (actually "mentioning" it, as Sperber and Wilson (1986) suggest) is followed by an overt sign referring to the attribution itself (*you mean*), which obviously reflects that "such fools" is only partly his own thought. He attributes the utterance to his interlocutor, but by uttering it, he dissociates himself from his partner's thought, thus creating ironic effect. Similarly, there is no overt stage direction to prescribe this, but it is obvious that Larry interrupts Broadbent's statement ending with "such men" with his contradicting exclamation bearing negative overtone, the contradiction arising from the positively implied "men" and the inherently negative "fools". The linking

element between the two phrases is parallelism achieved through the double use of the preceding adjective “such”. To sum up, when Broadbent misunderstands the implication of Larry’s story and interprets it as “magnificent”, Larry echoes his last words, replacing “men” (implying: reasonable creatures) with “fools” (persons lacking good sense and judgment) and thus turning the original meaning into its opposite and as a result, being ironic.

“Ironical meaning has been described as the opposition, negation or contradiction of the sentence meaning” (Barbe 1995: 25). In “Harry is a genius”, the audience has to differentiate between “surface” sentence meaning (the face value meaning of the sentence) and the situationally probable “intended” meaning. If the literal meaning does not prove to be true, based on the conversational cooperative cues noticeable in the interaction, then the hearer must look for another interpretation, an ironic reading. What is the closest to the literal meaning is its opposite: “Harry is not a genius.”)

A similar case can be identified in Larry’s conversation with Broadbent when the latter confesses to him that he proposed to Miss Reilly the night before.

- (8) LARRY. Well, you are a nice infant to be let loose in this country! Fancy the potcheen⁷ going to your head like that!
 BROADBENT. Not to my head, I think. (...) No: potcheen goes to the heart (...). (p. 110)

With the help of his ironic words (“*nice infant*”), Larry does not intend to soften his expression of criticism of Broadbent’s hasty proposal, but to condemn his interlocutor by humiliating him through sarcasm and coldness. The “infant” frame contains the implicature that if children are “let loose”, they may commit childish acts and they may not realise the consequences of their actions. Larry implies that the same thing might have happened to Broadbent as he, like a reasonable adult, was not there to help him. Doyle’s subsequent utterance further develops the “infant” frame: children are not allowed to consume alcoholic drinks (as Broadbent did the night before) and his irresponsible proposal is the result of losing his head after consuming the strong Irish drink. Broadbent, on his part, infers that Larry’s second utterance should not be taken literally. Naturally if he were helped by the presence of contextualisation cues, such as code switching, features of oral art, repetition, marked wording, prosody, interjection, laughter, mimicry, etc. (see Kotthof 2006: 7), this misunderstanding would not have taken place. However, there are no such signs available for him, therefore he leaves this act of criticism unseen and does not react to it in any hostile way but gives a metaphoric answer, referring to the reaction this drink stirs in the consumer’s emotional state.

⁷ Strong Irish alcoholic drink.

Last but not least, it is **Father Keegan**, an outcast and “an Irish saint”, who employs irony, moreover, dark sarcasm most frequently. In his case, irony is the sign of clear vision and sense of reality. When Broadbent complacently boasts to him about his already feeling at home in Roscullen, he very openly throws the truth into his face with bitter sarcasm, confronting him with his reflection:

- (9) BROADBENT. (...) Well, Mr Keegan, as I said, I begin to see my way here. I begin to see my way.
 KEEGAN (*with a courteous inclination*). The conquering Englishman, sir. Within 24 hours of your arrival you have carried off our only heiress, and practically secured the parliamentary seat. (...) you will comfort me with the bustle of a great hotel, and the sight of the little children carrying the golf clubs of your tourists as a preparation for the life to come. (p. 153)

This retort clearly mirrors Broadbent’s real intentions on his “other island”, and it is taken as a direct criticism. He is the only one who directs a direct attack to the Englishman’s face and does not mitigate it. But even this ironic remark is turned against him. In his reply, Broadbent suggests that exactly for his open mind and critical sense should Keegan be shown as an attraction to the tourists.

Keegan’s great ironical tirade turns the tables on both Broadbent and Doyle, revealing their true intentions and true identity:

- (10) KEEGAN (*with polished irony*). I stand rebuked, gentlemen. (...) You are both, I am told, thoroughly efficient civil engineers; and I have no doubt the golf links will be a triumph of your art. Mr. Broadbent will get into parliament most efficiently, which is more than St. Patrick could do if he were alive now. You may even build the hotel efficiently, if you can find enough efficient masons, carpenters, and plumbers, which I rather doubt. (*Dropping his irony...*) When the hotel becomes insolvent (*Broadbent takes his cigar out of his mouth, a little taken aback*) your English business habits will secure the thorough efficiency of the liquidation. You will reorganize the scheme efficiently (*Broadbent and Larry look quickly at one another; for this, unless the priest is an old financial hand, must be inspiration*); you will get rid of its original shareholders efficiently after efficiently ruining them; and you will finally profit very efficiently by getting that hotel for a few shillings in the pound. ... (p. 158)

Keegan echoes Broadbent’s earlier words on efficiency, which were used in a positive sense at the time, turning them into their opposite meaning. As known, repetition, echoing in itself is a contextualisation cue for irony. This is emphasised by the mention of St Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, in the very mundane, secular

context of parliamentary work. Finally, he turns the topic of his speech on the truly financial side of “efficiency”, implying the meaning of “profit”. The playwright’s comments literally represent the effect Keegan’s words create in his interlocutor’s mind and suggest that irony attained its goal.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have investigated some of the humorous and ironic remarks of two different ethnicity characters of *John Bull's Other Island*. Our analyses have revealed that through their face-to-face linguistic manifestations they display two different kinds of verbal behaviour and attitude, showing an ambiguous English and Irish stereotype. A double reversal of roles can be detected in the verbal manifestations of the two protagonists, as representatives of the two ethnic stereotypes. On the one hand, the English Broadbent’s verbal behaviour reveals an Irish identity in so far as his utterances lack humour and irony, but in fact he approaches the stiff, moralising, cold and cynical English stereotype, who – also verbally – tries (and manages) to cheat on his conversational partners (the Irish), pretending to be more Irish than they are. On the other hand, on surface level Larry Doyle’s utterances reveal a fake English stereotype, being a sober realist, frequently employing irony in his attitude towards his English friend but also towards the other Irish characters and himself. His realistic, and often cynical detachment from all the important issues of life, his rationality, absence of emotions and strong predilection for irony are stereotypically English features. However, his affective attitude towards his country and the passivity he displays while complaining about it, make him a typical Irishman, and this role overrides the English one.

It has also been shown that these characters’ humorous and ironic remarks define their identity and also work as solidarity shaping devices towards their in-group. Ironically, this in-group proves to be an ambiguous Irish-English conglomerate represented by Broadbent and Doyle. The ethnic layer of these characters’ identity is not at stake any longer when in interaction with the Irish Father Keegan. Instead, a more universal, “international” identity (defined by financial interests) is revealed as opposed to the identity void of any interests represented by Father Keegan. The title of the play (*John Bull's Other Island*) proves to be an excellent display of a mega-ironic attitude from the part of the playwright to represent this idea.

Source

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