Book review of *Danish Humour – SINK OR SWIM*

by Lita Lundquist and Helen Dyrbye, Samfundslitteratur, 2022.

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Danish Humour – SINK OR SWIM is a 175-page e-book about Danish humour and Danes' *humour socialisation*, i.e. the process by which human beings are socialised into specific forms of humour through the culture (and language) in which they grow up. The book is based on this hypothesis, which is defended and substantiated throughout the book, supported by different theories and a multitude of examples of encounters between Danes and non-Danes. The idea of humour socialisation is not novel and was presented in earlier works by Lundquist (such as 2020 and 2021). However, in *Danish Humour – SINK OR SWIM*, Lundquist, Danish researcher in linguistics; text; discourse; and humour has a co-author, Helen Dyrbye, a British language consultant and translator. Dyrbye has lived in Denmark for many years and has therefore become acquainted with Danish humour in different settings. Examples of (failed) humour events from earlier works of Lundquist (2020, 2021) can be found in the book alongside new examples based on Dyrbye's experiences with Danes.

In the introduction, the goal of the book is described as two-fold: "to provide insight and warnings to a wide range of Danes", and "to help all other nationalities to open up and accept the friendly intention underlying what can come across as 'sledgehammer icebreakers'".[1]

The book opens with the following three words: inappropriate, in-your-face, and rude. Indeed, this is the way non-Danes have described Danish humour in questionnaires. Not exactly a glowing recommendation.

The authors sketch two models in their introduction, which are pivotal to understanding the function of humour in interaction and what shapes humour. Their first model shows their humour event model, which describes how a humour event intervenes in an interaction between two speakers, A and B. This humour event essentially changes the interaction in one of two ways: either the relationship between A and B improves (that is, the humour event has a positive outcome) or the relationship deteriorates (when the humorous attempt causes offence or is unsuccessful). Their second model outlines the process of humour socialisation – a process in which language, society and humour are in a reciprocal relationship and thus shape and are shaped by each other.

The book itself is structured around these three aspects of humour socialisation and is split into three parts: Danish humour forms, characteristics of Danish society, and features of Danish language.

When we see the inverted commas around *charms* in the title of Part I, *The 'charms' of Danish humour*, we already feel warned about something that is supposed to be funny, not being funny, and when we get to the headline of Chapter 1 of this part, *Happiness, alcohol and sex*, we feel confirmed in our fear. The chapter is introduced by an example of a Chinese student's meeting with a Danish buddy and a supposed humorous comment by the latter that leaves the Chinese student not only very surprised, but also offended. According to the book, the Danes have a fondness for what might be termed 'speeding', and this is also what the Chinese student experiences: the "very quick reaction (of Danes) – as if it is an innate component in them". The chapter asks the relevant question "Was this an example of humour?" as a starting point for introducing the field of humour studies. According to the authors, it is generally accepted that "the prevailing feeling resulting from a positive humour event is a feeling of mirth and well-being" and that "this emotion is caused by the surprise of being

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[1] The e-book does not contain page numbers and the origin of the quotes will be evident from the preceding context.

confronted with different 'mental worlds' that are suddenly and unexpectedly juxtaposed." The authors also use the example to illustrate the typical Danish (self-) irony. Irony is then described through two theories: The Echo Theory and The Pretense Theory. In the example, the Danish buddy echoes "a traditional piece of wisdom" and he pretends to agree with the point of view that he voices while he actually dissociates himself from it.

Chapter 2 (*Police, passports and personal comments*) also begins with an illustrative example about Danish humour mentality, this time regarding a Serbian woman's experience in a Danish airport, where the passport control officer makes a "funny" comment. Afterwards the chapter discusses what would have happened if the foreign visitors from their examples had understood the attempts at humour, what they could have responded, and what new relations could have been created. One of the main points in this chapter is that Danes do not make a clear distinction between private life and work life when using humour. In this chapter, it is also shown how it is possible to "cancel" a humour event if one recognises that it is unsuccessful by withdrawing a failed humorous comment.

Chapter 3 (*Virtual hilarity*) opens with a famous clip that went viral internationally, where the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen in a speech at the inaugural session of the Danish Parliament began to laugh uncontrollably which, in turn, made several members of Parliament laugh as well. The episode serves as an example of two theories: *the relief theory of laughter* and *the superiority theory of laughter*. The first one describes laughter "as a "physical" event which, from a hydraulic mindset, releases energy in the nervous system precisely as the pressure-relief valve works in a steam boiler". The authors describe how the laughter gradually spreads to all MPs and that "[i]t does resemble an obvious and massive release of energy, *(sic)* that is difficult to resist joining in". However, as the British co-author suggests, the Danish Prime Minister's speech links the specific situation (that of an elephant and a camel who were best friends) with another more serious topic: the blanket order to separate under-age refugee girls from their husbands, irrespective of individual circumstances. Therefore, the book argues, those with a non-Danish background could see the laughter as a sign of superiority. This interpretation relates to the superiority theory of laughter, which originates from Aristotle and Plato. The chapter then discusses these theories as two opposing explanations for the reasons and functions of laughter in the above example. The end of the chapter concerns non-Danes' reactions to the laughter event in the Danish Parliament.

The first chapter of Part II (*The strengths of Danish Society*), Chapter 4, *The Danes and their "Great Humour"*, focuses on the process through which national humour arises with emphasis on Danish humour. The starting point of the chapter is that Danish humour, characterised by speed, irony, and self-irony, which in a Danish context may work as an icebreaker, works differently in international settings. The chapter aims to explain the origin of humour differences and the concept used to explain this is *humour socialisation*, which briefly explained consists of three steps: *humour breeding*, *humour socialisation*, and *humour civilisation*. The first step occurs in childhood, where specific humour breeding occurs in the context of the family and a specific national language. The next step is a broader humour socialisation where the individual's humour is influenced by new social groups, such as school and work. Finally, individuals' humour fuses with the humour expressed by their fellow countrymen and gains the characteristics of a specific national humour, because people are socialised by the same national context, which is formed by a specific process of civilisation. The authors are inspired by the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding who uses the terms "itsy-bitsy humour", "the little humour" and "the great humour" for the humours we meet at the different stages. Afterwards, the authors zoom in on how Danes are bred into their great humour and which factors have led to the great humour typical of Danes characterised by irony and self-irony which are often found "astonishing and crushing" by non-Danes.

Chapter 5, *Humour civilisation*, focuses on the processes that have bred and socialised Danes into their great humour. The chapter opens with another cringeworthy example of a Dane's attempt at being funny, this time experienced by the English author of the book. In brief, the example describes

how a Dane makes fun of an Indian gentleman's turban behind his back. The example serves to illustrate Danish "dumb-smart" comments, a new word first used by the Danish queen in her New Year's speech in 1984, using "an innovative combination" of 'daft'/'dumb'+'smart' to describe Danish humour and a tendency to blurt out "smart" comments in the company of foreigners without being aware of others' cultural norms. The royal incident serves as a point of departure for the subsequent attempt to "find out what has shaped and moulded this specifically Danish variant of a national humour style". This part builds on the insights of Norbert Elias in particular, who provides a useful method for addressing a nation's Great Humour. The authors conclude that a specific Danish variant of Great Humour "is rooted in a consensual, conflict-avoiding campfire mentality". The chapter also offers descriptions of French and British history and society by way of comparison.

Chapter 6 (*Humour, irony and self-irony in Danish management*) focuses on the use of different forms of humour (including irony and self-irony) in Danish management. As in the other chapters, the examples are plentiful and include the Danish national football team, anecdotes from a backyard football match, snippets from interviews with non-Danes working in Denmark (and Danes working abroad) as well as references to popular Danish culture such as films and tv-shows. However, the main take-aways from the chapter pertain to the importance of "self-irony" which is often mentioned as a typical Danish form of humour, and, specifically, it can be seen as the "antidote to self-importance" and thus it fits right in with the Law of Jante, another oft-cited Danish cultural trait. And some Danes even take this a step further and suggest that self-irony can be seen as a "reflexive management practice" (Molin 2006): The argument is that if managers show themselves to be vulnerable through self-irony and self-deprecation, their staff and colleagues are better able to identify with them and feel relaxed in their presence. However, this is also tied in closely with the Danish organisational structure which is more often than not quite flat compared to that of other nations.

In order for self-irony to function in the Danish setting, one essential aspect needs to be present: trust (Kirkeby 2003). According to Danish philosopher Ole Fogh Kirkeby, a balance between four communicative moods (gravity, irony, humour and righteous indignation) is needed to foster trust between individuals. Kirkeby further urges managers (in the Danish context) to not be too controlling but instead see their staff as peers.

Lundquist and Dyrbye also link this to the power of the trade unions in Denmark - a country where "win-win solutions" are preferred and there is strength in numbers.

The third and final part (*The baffling Danish language*) of the book takes a closer look at features of the Danish language, in particular features which can be used to express humour.

In Chapter 7 (*Language and spontaneous verbal humour*), the authors state that we cannot avoid looking in detail at language when exploring "the function and effects of [verbal] humour". As in previous chapters, this chapter also features another few examples of interactions between Danes and non-Danes in which the Danes somehow (inadvertently or not) seem to get themselves into deep waters through their humorous remarks. The authors also comment on the role of laughter and how that (as a response to a humorous remark or situation, even when unintentional) can function as a positive social mediator.

The authors also introduce the pragmatic aspects of language and the work of Grice, the cooperative principle, conversational implicatures and, of course, Grice's four maxims. In the light of Grice's work they then introduce a "conversational humour implicature" to help us make sense of what transpires in a humorous interaction. In short, if speaker A says something which at first seems hard to believe and listener B decides that it is not an outright lie, then listener B can infer that it must be humour.

The authors add that this humour implicature is also helpful when dealing with Danes' use of irony and self-irony. Indeed, they suggest a "conversation irony implicature" which states that if listener B believes that an unsuitable remark made by speaker A is not an outright lie but instead indicates that the speaker is distancing themselves from what was said or a situation or somehow

shows a negative attitude towards what was said, then the remark was probably ironic. Finally, the authors also introduce a "conversational self-irony implicature" which adds an additional interpretative layer, namely that if listener B decodes that speaker A is the target of an unsuitable remark (and it is neither a lie nor an attempt at distancing) then it is likely an example of self-irony.

In Chapter 8 (*Meeting the Danish language*), the authors provide a whirlwind tour of the Danish language. They introduce the reader to the phonetics of Danish and even provide clickable recordings for a full immersive experience. The authors also comment briefly on features of Danish such as the duality of words in Danish (where the same word can mean different things), grammatical gender (Danish has two grammatical genders) and the important role of context in a language as ambiguous as Danish. Even the Danish numbers are mentioned as being particularly confusing.

Finally, in this chapter, the authors also touch upon what happens when Danes speak English as a *lingua franca.* In particular, they point out Danes' lack of use of politeness markers such as different types of softeners, the usefulness of the words *sorry* and *please* (which have no Danish counterpart) and they mention the fact that, to Danes, no topic is too personal or off-limits, so it is not unusual for Danes to outright ask about political beliefs, issues of religion, rates of pay and sexual details.

Chapter 9 (*Fathoming the Danish language and humour*) introduces the reader to what the authors call the "humour warning signals" of the Danish language: small dialogical particles such as *nok, vist, da, jo* and *vel.* These particles are monosyllabic, unaccented adverbs which "act as triggers that warn listeners to supply extra meaning from the context and not to take what is said too seriously". Indeed, these small particles indicate an assumed shared background and thus set the scene for ironic and self-ironic language use. However, similar particles do not exist in English, for instance, which is why, according to the authors, Danes using English as a lingua franca sometimes land themselves in hot water when attempting similar humorous remarks as in Danish.

The authors also use hypothetical reconstructions to show what their exemplary Danes might have said (were they speaking English) in the many examples sprinkled throughout the book.

The authors wrap up this chapter by considering the links between language and thought, specifically national mentality or national ways of thinking. They here draw on their previous chapters which considered the Danish Great Humour and the Danish 'campfire mentality'.

In the conclusion, the authors briefly sum up the contents of the book but also introduce two additional terms. The first of these is *gelatophobia* – the fear of being laughed at. Danes, seemingly, do not take humour personally, however, Danes "are following today's general movement towards feeling more readily offended" so perhaps Danes are (no longer?) as thick-skinned as previously (or as they themselves believe). The second term is the notion of *unlaughter*, which very clearly demonstrates disapproval to the person joking. In this way, the use (or non-use) of laughter helps socialise Danes and non-Danes alike into the current humour environment in which they find themselves.

The book is a further development of Lundquist (2020). Experiences and examples from the British co-author, who has personally experienced Danish humour, complement together with other new examples those we know from Lundquist (2020). The book benefits from the authentic examples, both because they add credibility to the book and because, despite their toe-curling nature, they have a certain entertainment value. It goes without saying that not all Danes share the same type of humour, but we have probably all become acquainted with types like the passport control officer. In addition, the book is written in a tongue-in-cheek style. The book's prevailing use of sailing metaphors (as exemplified in the title) also contributes to this style.

The e-book format makes the book easy to distribute, and it is also this format that enables the inclusion of clickable recordings, although they may seem a little excessive in a book that is not about the Danish language *per se* but about humour. The format unfortunately also means that there are no page numbers on the individual pages. Each part of the book ends with some *Anchor points*, which is

a welcome summary of the part in question.

Similar to Lundquist (2020), also reviewed in this journal (Jensen & Dam 2020), the book is aimed at non-academics, however, with its interdisciplinary approach and use of many theories, it is also worth reading for academics, even if the many unsubstantiated claims and hypothetical reconstructions can be a little hard to swallow.

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