

## **How do the English Project Themselves? Notes on the Selfhood and Identity Referring to the English, as Seen From the Perspective of Humour Studies**

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### **Abstract**

English humour is religiously involved in the creation of the English identity drawing on the nation's memory, history as well as culture. A great deal of it is devoted to the preservation of a certain self-portrait on the part of the English in that their identity is glorified, demonstrated in a positive light, with the English invariably playing a noble role against the backdrop of historical events, frequently standing alone in the presence of traumatic and unpredictable changes. This article aims to examine English comedy from a cognitive linguistic perspective to demonstrate how the English identity is formulated and (re)shaped, and how the concept of the English self is proudly created in relation to the national identity via the cultural memories and English humour.

### **Keywords**

English humour, conceptual integration theory, blending, mental spaces, national identity, world wars

## **1. Introduction**

Whenever we discuss English humour, we must simultaneously refer to the identity of the English who devised it. In fact, it is their identity that has been driving the urge to laugh and find things amusing. It ought to be, therefore, acknowledged that English people define themselves and their sense of humour

via their identity and vice versa. Hence, the question of their sense of humour must always be explicated in connection with their culture and how they have perceived themselves through times.

In this article, I wish to demonstrate how the concept of English humour has shaped the notion of the English identity in relation to the two world wars. I would like to prove that the contemporary idea of what is funny for the English is inextricably linked with their experience of wars and conflicts. Further, I wish to demonstrate how this experience has formed and allowed reshaping and recreating the pride in their own identity. As Richards put forward: “Culture, in particular popular culture, is the battleground for identity. Cinema and latterly television have played a vital role in defining, mythifying and disseminating national identity” (Richards 2009, Introduction, p. 12).

Thus, following his statement, my analysis of humour is to proceed along the lines of cultural development. In addition, as the material for scrutinising I have chosen one Monty Python’s sketch about war, a scene from *Black Adder* commenting on the trench war, and the sitcoms entitled *Allo, Allo* and *Dad’s Army*, which are characterised by their undying popularity, continually arising new interest in younger generations. This choice is based on Richards’s observations on culture, identity and mass media, as quoted above.

## 2. What is Englishness?

Before I revert to the analysis of the humorous scenes, I would like to present a brief characterisation of the concept of Englishness and English identity, together with the issues they involve. I strongly believe that a few remarks on how the English identity has evolved over the years, or how it should be regarded, will add to the humour explanation and will enable me to provide a much fuller insight into the notion of Englishness as such. Also, I wish to briefly present a cognitive linguistic theory that I will use as a tool to guide me through my analysis, namely the conceptual integration theory. Afterwards, the proper analysis will commence.

To begin with, it is necessary to state that when discussing the identity of the English, we oftentimes arrive at the dichotomy between the English and the British, the two terms being misleadingly swapped for one another and used interchangeably without too much consideration by the foreigners, for instance (Ibidem, pp. 3–4). According to Richards, non-natives perceive the English/British as displaying a set of characteristics such as being phlegmatic, methodical, well-balanced, sporting, chivalrous, cool, daring, patriotic, aristocratic and alike. However, the feature which appears to prevail above others is the attribution of a remarkable sense of humour and comedy to the English/British, or, as one might say, it is rather the attribution of absolutely no sense of humour to the English/British by foreigners, which proves that the English/British sense of what is funny can be grossly misunderstood by many non-native speakers (Ibidem, p. 4). The interchangeable misuse of the two adjectives (i.e. English and British) in respect of humour may seem to be a trivial matter for some, and it is frequently banalised

to the extent that the English and British, which stand for different concepts, are accepted as synonymous. Even among the citizens of the UK, there can be confusion as to which adjective ought to refer to whom and what it means specifically. Hence, the vague use of both, and the fuzzy boundary between the two terms inevitably lead to confusion for some. The reason I mention this issue here, in the beginning, is to clarify as well as justify the importance of precise terminology and methodology in the depiction of the national identity of the English as well as the British for that matter. Thus, the English ought to be used as a term referring only to the inhabitants of England and to England somewhat related, as opposed to the Scots, the Welsh or the Irish, whereas the adjective British ought to be used as denoting all the above-stated nationals and more, for we encounter immigrants and their families who also use this term in order to mark their belonging and name their ethnicity within the British Isles. Additionally, it is vital to recognise that Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all been known to pride themselves on their separate identity from the English; therefore I see no reason why we should forbid the English to express their own sense of being, excluding the above nationalities. More importantly, the sense of Britishness and the origin of the term can be traced back to the 18th century, when all the countries that constitute Great Britain nowadays formed the Union, and, thus, the era of their collective nationality began as well as diversity in respect of race and ethnicity (Richards 2009, p. 6). Also, when we pay attention to the fact that the rise in nationalist feelings among the other subgroups of the British has always been warmly welcome and widely applauded, we need to be able to agree for the same special status to be given to the English. Having provided a distinction between the terms, I wish to state immediately that the dichotomy and confusion in their interpretation is not unsubstantiated. There are plenty of reasons lying behind their complex nature. Apart from the self-identity of all inhabitants of the British Isles, and their need for independence, there are also historical, geographical and political matters that play a major role. Firstly, it is crucial to remember that Great Britain is an island and its insularity has a great impact on its inhabitants. A case in point might be the distinction that all peoples living in the UK will make, upon referring to their own community, as in *us*, versus *the Continent*, for instance, as if the British were not part of Europe but constituted a separate entity with a completely separate identity, or shall I say identities, to follow. We need to recognise the importance of insularity, as it shapes the mentality and the idea of a nation, however complex internally it might be. Specifically, the geographical borders in the form of the seas that separate the UK from all other countries add to the peculiar idea of separate as well as more secluded country, whose inhabitants are alienated, which might be uttered in a negative sense in mind. On the other hand, this alienation allows them to develop in their own natural manner, which can be classed as a positive phenomenon. The paradox, further, gives rise to uniqueness both in terms of character as well as mentality.

Secondly, there is a great number of typically English values that helped to shape the notion of Britishness within the 18th and 19th centuries (Ibidem, pp. 7–9). To be precise, we can enumerate such qualities as diversity, being Protestant, claiming to be God's chosen people, democracy, progress, and last but not least wealth. Additionally, one more unifying factor was secured in the form of the English monarchy at that time, i.e. the reign of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

The monarchs both epitomised a truly blessed married couple, another ideal that seemed vital in respect of the Victorian society. Also, there were other values held in high esteem that originated specifically with the English, namely sincerity, chivalry, a sense of humour, concern for other people, duty, service, anti-intellectualism, superiority over other nations, and finally common sense. Nonetheless, these qualities eventually started to relate to the whole nation, and though they were originally English, they began to denote the British as a united community. The famous quotation that reveres the values of the English comes from Cecil Rhodes: “Ask any man what nationality he would prefer to be, and ninety nine out of a hundred will tell you that they would prefer to be Englishmen” (Rhodes, after Paxman 2007, p. 1). It basically states that in the past, other nations envied the English their position in the world arena. It might come across as arrogant as well as bordering on ignorance, yet it does show the pride in identity that was born. To prove this, we can only look at Paxman’s statement: “Once upon a time the English knew who they were. There was such a ready list of adjectives to hand. There were polite, unexcitable, reserved and had hot-water bottles instead of a sex life: how they reproduced was one of the mysteries of the western world. They were doers rather than thinkers, writers rather than painters, gardeners rather than cooks. They were class-bound, hidebound and incapable of expressing their emotions. They did their duty. Fortitude bordering on the incomprehensible was a byword: ‘I have lost my leg, by God! exclaimed Lord Uxbridge, as shells exploded all over the battlefield. ‘By God, and have you!’ replied the Duke of Wellington. A soldier lying mortally wounded in a flooded trench on the Somme was, so the myth went, likely to say only that he ‘mustn’t grumble’. Their most prized possession was a sense of honour. They were steadfast and trustworthy. The word of an English gentleman was as good as a bond sealed in blood” (Paxman 2007, p. 1).

Seemingly, we could refer to this as a kind of stereotypical or schematic thinking; however, such a way of describing the nation was easily applicable and widely used, both by the Englishmen and foreigners. This line of characterization prevailed both for the English and the British alike. Unfortunately, it all changed dramatically with the wartime, during which the UK citizens appeared to have lost not only lives but also their sense of being, direction and identity. Britain began to be known as the Land of Lost Content and the land without a clear purpose in existence (Ibidem, pp. 1–23; Marr 2009, pp. 113–228). Yet, it was not exclusively the wars that degraded the morale among the British. Much earlier in the history of that nation, we could observe a spectacular success and downfall that influenced the self-perception and judgement to a great extent, namely, the creation of the Empire and its influence on the national sentiments of the British people. To be honest, the creation of the geographical as well as political extension of Great Britain in the form of the colonies provided the whole nation with the idea that their race must be the chosen one, with a special status; that they are powerful and invincible, that there must have been, as if, some divine intervention which stood behind their success. Nothing and no one could interfere with the mighty nation, whose borders extended beyond the Isles and over whose territory the sun never set. What a profound impact it had on the inhabitants throughout Britain! With Britannia and John Bull, who epitomised the society’s power and status, the popularity and self-contentment influenced the mentality of the nation.

This impact has never been quite shrugged off, in fact, and still continues to reverberate throughout the British culture today. This special role of the chosen nation, easily comparable with the biblical Israelites, together with the marine power of the British and their reign over the seas, created the idea of the dominion that can never be subjugated or conquered (Richards 2007, pp. 31–57). Nevertheless, the euphoria of the colonial era came down with the sober realization of the truth behind the Empire, i.e. the fact that the British soldiers who were sent to the colonies to represent and spread the good old values of the English, such as gentlemanliness or moral Protestant conduct, were nothing more but a sinful and degenerated group. Further, the eventual fall of the Empire, in which the moral degeneration finally culminated and brought it spectacularly down, was beyond any comprehension for the British population. It evoked the feelings of dissatisfaction and disbelief, which continued throughout the years of later political changes, merely deepening the already “shattered” pride of the English/British, forever haunting their memories of successful past and any potential successful future. Such moments in the British history as the ruling of Margaret Thatcher, for example, and severe social and political situation around the times of high unemployment, strikes or riots, only deepened the wounds already existing before (Marr 2009, pp. 381–392). Additionally, the crisis of the monarchy and the legal system as well as the less important role that religion with its values started to play within the British society, all these aspects have caused the discontent and reservations among the society. Further, the much later affluent lifestyle of the 1950s and 60s, which was caused due to the earlier strict policies, led to self-discovery, self-assertion and sensation, derision for traditions as well as old values, such as family or faith. It also resulted in secularity, lack of responsibility, obscenity, individualism, violent self-assertion, aggressive pursuit of wealth at all costs, in the course of which the insularity and superiority deepened (Richards 2009, pp. 18–21). Those negative factors had a profound impact on the already complicated notion of the English national identity and made it more difficult to be grasped and accepted, after the years of the hype of the 18th and 19th centuries. To sum it up, the thorny issue of national identity has generated problems for many citizens of the UK for years, let alone the English, and it still does so.

Nevertheless, I must mention one more crucial phenomenon that actually rates positively on the spectrum of political, cultural and historical events that created the ideal of the modern British person. I specifically mean the world wars here. Certainly, I realise that these cannot be counted as positive events by any stretch of imagination. However, as far as I am concerned, the horrific times of the world wars induced the positive qualities of the British that are nostalgically reminisced about in the present times, too. I mean by that the fact that both WW1 & WW2 forced the British to demonstrate their positive traits, i.e. courage, stoicism, solidarity, good humour and resilience when fighting against the odds. The British regarded themselves as a few standing alone against many in the finest hour for common good. This self-perception and identity was created in the fight against Hitler, with “everyone pulling together” as well as other war propaganda and slogans, for instance “Keep Calm and Carry On” message that is incessantly reused nowadays in popular culture, sadly for commercial reasons though (Noakes and Pattinson 2013). Such experiences of utmost profoundness and importance are still recalled today in Britain, where the nostalgia for the great moments of the

past allows focusing on the great deeds and pushing the not so great ones into the background. Taking all these factors into consideration, I wish to prove, further in the course of this article, that it is exactly the nostalgia of the First and Second World War attitudes to life that allows shaping and reshaping the idea of Englishness as well as Britishness, together with one core value, i.e. the sense of humour, enabling both the English and the British to relate to it, and that aids the recreation of their modern identity. For my part, the complicated term of national identity can be approached from the humorous perspective, which will unite not only the English but also all the other nationalities that reside in the present-day UK without causing offense and havoc in the categorisation. It is the sense of humour that has been one of the most revered and characteristic values in Britain, and it applies to all the members of the British society. Nonetheless, I perceive the English sense of humour as based on the idea of the English people, which was spread all around Great Britain. Therefore, I shall sustain the term English humour in this paper. Below, I shall attempt to demonstrate that it is precisely this phenomenon that preserves the noblest qualities of the whole British society via its reference to the glorious past, such as the world wars.

### **3. The characterisation of identity – an overview**

Let me now briefly introduce the notion of identity, without which it is impossible to tackle the English sense of humour. It is true that everyone possesses a number of multiple identities (Richards 2009, p. 1). Such identities can be based on numerous factors, e.g. ethnic group, class, status, region, nation, gender, intellectual capacities, lifestyle, etc. (Ibidem, and Featherstone 2009). Out of all possible identities, the national identity is the strongest. Linguistically, one could equate it with the context in which we are educated and which influences our thinking processes and cognition in later life. To study this context means to learn how to comprehend a nation's selfhood and self-image. Currently, the English have only their English humour as a quality that reverberates in the pop culture and aids (re)shaping and (re)negotiating of the notion of Englishness, as well as Britishness, to be fair. I claim that it is impossible to separate the two in the modern times, and they are inextricably linked. (Although some people will insist that they are English strictly speaking, but will refer to their situation, political system and country as British.) This situation is, to some extent, the side product of the idea of political correctness in the UK, which again poses more issues for the already complex term of national identity. The question arises, then, in what way the English project themselves via their humour. English humour is the embodiment of Englishness; it has transformed itself as a notion to suit the peculiarity of the English nation, and thus it expresses the qualities that matter, namely freedom (no limits as to the selection of topics to laugh off), nonsense and absurdity, going to extremes, obscenity, references to the glorious past and highlighting the positive, nostalgia, superiority, anti-intellectualism. The English identity is based on English humour, which reinforces the collective memory. Memory is defined as "the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood

(identity), both on the personal and on the collective level” (Assmann 2008), and it is highly influenced by the context the people are brought up and exist within (see Jabłońska-Hood 2016 for an in-depth discussion on this issue). According to Erll, “no memory is ever purely individual, but [it is] always inherently shaped by collective contexts” (Erll 2008, p. 5). The English specifically preserve their collective British memory via the preservation of the chosen and glorious moments from the past. We can add that the highly popular notion of the memory boom, i.e. the widespread interest in certain events from the history of a nation, has been observed in the UK these days (Noakes and Pattinson 2013), and the British love to reminisce about their glorious past. Further, the collective memory always brings people together and creates common identity, which is also the case with the English and the British (the two coincide in the choice of comedy as a defining element). Hence, the need to create one’s own “postmemory” – an event from the past which is in many ways preserved in order to influence the lives of people who survived it and also future generations (Hirsh after Noakes and Pattinson 2013), has been felt keenly by the British community, and it is precisely the world wars and the English sense of humour that have coincided in order to remedy the situation. It is via those terms that both the English and the British are capable of identifying themselves and in this manner form the point of reference in their search for national identity and selfhood within the global pop culture of the current times; English humour which centres on nostalgia as to the world wars allows establishing the glorious and acceptable memories, on which the overall identity can rest, backgrounding the horrid and terrible events from the past that do not conform to the ideal identity of the British nation. Taking that thesis as a starting point, let me now turn to the analysis of selected scenes from the British comedies, which I hope will allow me to demonstrate the validity of the above statement. Before the analysis, though, I shall outline the most vital tenets of conceptual integration to help me to address the contents of the comedy in question.

#### **4. Conceptual integration, aka blending**

The conceptual integration theory is based on the notion of a mental space introduced by Gilles Fauconnier in his study of meaning. A mental space is comparable to the terms such as domain and frame, and it can be defined as a cognitive field of associations, which is triggered by a concept, e.g. a word (Fauconnier 1997, p. 16). This notion of a mental space is the basis of conceptual integration, as proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Conceptual integration, aka blending, is a process by means of which one mental space is linked to some other mental space in the form of correspondences between the two (for more on the following topic see Fauconnier 1998, Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Turner 2014, Per Ange Brandt 2005, Jabłońska-Hood 2015). To give an example, when we hear a statement: “This surgeon is a butcher” (Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999), we immediately activate a mental space of surgery and butchery and we try to find correspondences between the two so as to assign meaning to the sentence. This is exactly how conceptual integration works. Thus in the

beginning, we perceive correspondences between different mental spaces which form a topology. In the example just mentioned, we shall have the following set of similarities: a surgeon is a butcher, surgeon's methods of work are the butcher's procedures, such as making incisions is comparable to chopping the meat, the patient is the dead animal's meat, the tools of the surgeon, e.g. a scalpel, are linked with the butcher's tools, i.e. axes, chopping or separating knives, etc. The web of these correspondences is tightly knit and as such projected into another mental space, namely the blend. The blended space allows the contents to function on their own and to be further elaborated on. Thus, we might as well imagine the surgeon being so rough with the patient's body that he freely cuts and chops its parts and dismembers it, etc.; such connotations are perhaps drastic, yet imaginable in the context of the so-called running of the blend and its contents. Additionally, Fauconnier and Turner both advocate adding other elements to the already blended meaning, e.g. from related mental spaces, such as culture, to give just one example. Hence, in the Polish context, we could venture the interpretation where the surgeon is so lax and unprofessional that he does not notice dropping his watch into the patient's insides and sews it back, the true cases of such conduct being known to have happened in the past. Certainly, this information emerges and extends the blend in such a way that it is not possible to go backwards to the original mental spaces; however this procedure is described as the way our brain operates, according to the conceptual integration theory and its authors. In this manner, the blend acquires a new status and provides a language user with meaning in a dynamic, online and creative way (Jabłońska-Hood 2016a). For this reason, I would like to use conceptual integration in my analysis of English humour below. I am inclined to think that the blending theory helps to explicate humour and its creative side, thus I shall apply it to my analysis to follow. Yet, I do wish to stress that I have not explained the conceptual integration in its entirety, and there are more elements to it (for an in-depth discussion of which see Jabłońska-Hood 2015, pp. 15–93), but I believe the idea of a creatively blended mental spaces of diverse origin will be sufficient in order to explicate how English comedy uses data from nostalgic moments in the past to shape the identity of its citizens.

## 5. The analysis of humorous material

### 5.1. *Allo, Allo*

Let us now proceed with the analysis. I wish to begin with *Allo, Allo* – a British sitcom on the Second World War, which depicts the life of the French during the Nazi occupation. The whole series presents the French Resistance movement in France as exemplified by a middle-aged café owner Rene, who runs the business with his wife, and two young waitresses. Incidentally, the latter both desire him and have affairs with him. It is in Rene's café that we also meet the top girl in the Resistance movement, the enigmatic Michelle, who always appears in the least expected or convenient moment and imposes certain resistance activities

on Rene and his friends. It is also in this coffee shop that we encounter the German occupants, namely officers Kurt von Strohm and Hubert Gruber, and the head of the Gestapo, i.e. Herr Flick, and his lover Helga. Further, we are made aware of two British pilots who have been dropped in France as part of the British military operation to aid the efforts against the Third Reich, and who are hidden in Rene's café and seem to be presented as fairly useless. Actually, all the characters are useless and their actions to undermine the Germans are ridiculous, e.g. dressing the British pilots as a farm cow in order to move them back to the seaside area and transport them back to their own country. All the Resistance zany conduct and slapstick is matched by the total incapability on the part of the Nazi, including the Gestapo. Whereas the German soldiers are cowardly and want a peaceful existence in France where they, as invaders, can enjoy certain privileges such as having access to beautiful French girls, or smuggling precious art (*Madonna with the Big Boobies* – the name itself is ludicrous), etc., Her Flick, who at first seems ruthless and frightening, is highly incompetent in his efforts to cover up his erotic infatuation with Helga and his actual lack of any skills. What we perceive on the screen forms the part of a mental space 1 of WW2 within the film, with its poetic licence, and it can, then, be compared with the real atrocities of the Second World War, the latter being regarded as a mental space 2. If we think about both mental spaces clearly, we can see the incongruities between the distorted fiction and painful reality to the extent that we are left with nothing else but laughter at comparing and contrasting the sitcom version of the events with true historical past. The incompetent, silly and downright stupid Nazis, who are presented as more than human in any aspect of their existence, certainly are far from the ruthless German officers and Gestapo police that killed people at will and committed other war crimes. Also, the French Resistance with Michele, who incessantly repeats what becomes a sitcom's catchphrase: "Listen carefully, for I shall say it only once", is as ludicrous as Rene and his household, thus the movement is portrayed in a distorted mirror, as compared to the real efforts on the part of the actual Resistance displayed during the war by the French. The two mental spaces, the film discourse and the actual history are so very much different that they could not be further apart. Yet when blended, they provide a source of incongruities so distant and so opposed that they culminate in laughter. And it is not to conceal the truth of any kind, but only to give the British viewer a chance to accept what happened during the war, and perhaps perceive the history with a twinkle of a smile on their face. The British, it must be said, have very fond memories of the bravery of their own soldiers in confronting Hitler and his army, thinking of themselves as the chosen few who stood in that finest hour against all odds and opposed the tyranny. This nostalgic memory is also hinted at in here in the form of the British soldiers, again incompetent and peculiar to match the other characters, and not to present their own nationality as superior; hence, bringing down their own role and equating all other nations in their funny and unsubstantiated efforts to fight the cause so great and profound that there is no other way to discuss the topic of war but to distort it and laugh it off. In addition, there are also incongruities present within the space of the sitcom that enhance our delight. A case in point is the fact that all the characters speak perfect English, some with the French or German accents, but still understandable, yet the British pilots do not understand



who are too old to be able to fight, let alone save anyone, such as Lance Corporal Jones, Private Godfrey or Private Frazer. There is one young man in the squad, i.e. Private Pike, and it would appear that with him we might expect some luck for the regiment due to the fact that he is strong and eager to act. Nonetheless, Private Pike is the illegitimate child of one of the older members of the regiment (precisely Sergeant Wilson), and his mother imposes the territorial career on him solely to be able to stay in touch with his father. The only intelligent person is Sergeant Wilson, whose misfortune it is actually to find himself in the regiment, as he is aware of the painful, idiotic and ludicrous potential of his fellow soldiers and understands their errors, but cannot verbalize the criticism, not being the supervisor. We also experience, as viewers, many adventures of the incompetent regiment, which somehow, through the perseverance, determination and resilience in the times of hardship, grows on us so we develop the positive feelings for the underdogs, who end up safe and sound from all their oppressions at all times. Again, this sitcom's mental space of the Territorial Army is compared to the historical past where civilians organised themselves and took part in silent opposition, and carried on with determination during the Battle of Britain (according to the wartime posters encouraging ordinary civilians to Keep Calm and Carry On, as these are continually used these days to promote positive attitudes). Such a conduct is demonstrated with nostalgia as worthy the cause, hence we take to the useless cast of characters, who despite all continued their fight on their own terms, and maybe did not achieve much, but still demonstrated the attitude to remain within the nation's postmemories, which shapes the proud identity of the British to this day.

Based on the above, we can enumerate the two mental spaces: the first one is the space of the sitcom and the second one refers to the historical past. Via the comparison of the useless underdogs of *Dad's Army* with the real perseverance, great efforts and struggle to continue in order to show the brave attitudes and boost the morale of the nation, we arrive at the incongruities that clash and provoke humour.

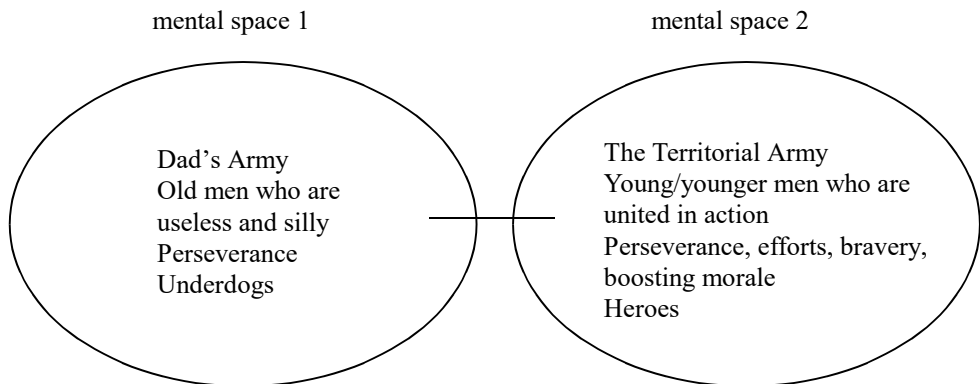


Figure 2. Dad's Army versus the Territorial Army of WW2.

### 5.3. Monty Python's war humour

Now, I wish to tackle one of Monty Python's sketches<sup>1</sup> on Hitler which alludes back to the painful past, but turns it around for the sake of nostalgia and identity preservation. They all formulate a mental space of the sketch that presents Hitler as this hidden manic individual, who lives undercover in Britain in one of the London's B&Bs (he is actually named Mr Hilter, which in itself generates amusement, as it is not difficult to decipher, and we immediately realise who is hiding under such a name. Also, his look helps us in it, since he is always dressed in the uniform and has a black little moustache), with other generals who are also badly camouflaged with their surnames, i.e. Ron Vibbentrop (bringing in associations to Von Ribbentrop) as well as Bimmel (read here Rimmel). Mr Hilter plans to win the national elections and gain power from the people. Hitler is presented here as a man who makes the speeches via the megaphone in the streets to advocate his cause. We have some listeners who lend their ear to what he is saying, but these are exemplified by children who are puzzled by his weird speeches and one villager in the city – a Monty Pythonian character who symbolises all that is idiotic, unreformable and uneducated. Another person who seems to appreciate him is a mad woman, which again provides a comment on the cognitive capacities of Mr Hilter. In this way, the mental space of the sketch presents Hitler as degraded, living a lie and misunderstood. Now, if we compare and contrast this with the real history, we shall find the utmost clashes of all. For example, the real Hitler was powerful and created his Third Reich, a might country to rule all over the world. He was famous for his speeches, which were broadcast to millions of Germans and enticed the German nation to hatred, to war and military action against the enemies around in order to build the world superpower. Also, his generals had powers and were feared by many. The two blended mental spaces provide for supreme incongruities that allow us to mock Mr Hitler. In fact, his uselessness is laughable, because it is not the character of the underdog that we encounter in him. He does not have sympathy or compassion, but he deserves contempt, and, therefore, the British viewer can reign supreme over the blend of Mr Hilter, who is imposed on the real person in history. Thus, the Britons scold the tyrant and his years of power, which allows them to come to terms with the other war events as well, instilling in them the superiority over the ridiculous Mr Hilter reduced to a tenant, who has only dreams to win political elections and revolt again. The comfort it brings allows reconciling the hurtful and dramatic memories of the nation who fought back and won over in this sense, having the last laugh, if nothing else. This part of national identity provides the British people with the comfort of recalling Hitler and his times from memory, as they can reduce him to the unimportant silly little man with no power or voice at all<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In order to watch the full sketch, please visit the following: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsQM9HKtvA4>

<sup>2</sup> On alluding to wartime and Hitler, an interesting phenomenon can be observed among the Britons, namely, they like to refer to Hitler as Mr Hitler in sitcoms, e.g. in *Dad's Army* the music composed for the purposes of the comedy starts with the direct reference to Mr Hitler (*Who do you think you are kidding Mr Hitler...*), and it constitutes a song performed in a surprisingly jolly manner, which contrasts considerably with the serious topic of WW2. Also, there are rhymes and other melodies which were created to boost the morale of the British during the war, and which

The blending of the mental space 1 related to the sketch presentation of Mr Hilter with the real past figure of Adolf Hitler and his Reich results in numerous incongruities that prompt our laughter.

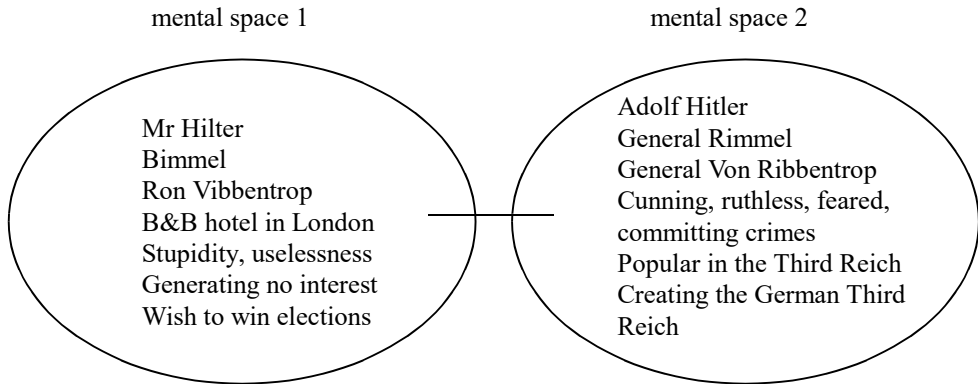


Figure 3. Mr Hilter versus Adolf Hitler: the incongruities between a film character and his real equivalent.

#### 5.4. *Black Adder* and the subject of war

Let us finally deal with *Black Adder* and his perspective on WW1. In the sketch that I shall refer to, we find *Black Adder* as a commander of soldiers in the trenches in the First World War about to be visited by General Melchett<sup>3</sup>. *Black Adder* warns his soldiers only to voice opinions when directly spoken to, as well as to behave. Then, we see the awaited General enter the room, in which he immediately recognizes one soldier, George, and wants to converse with him, but the soldier is waiting for a clear permission to speak from *Black Adder*. When he receives it, he starts blabbering on with the General reminiscing about the good old times in public education. They even sing a ridiculous and smutty song together, as a joke. Then, General Melchett turns to another soldier, Balderick, who does not have a posh background, and, in fact, has permission to answer the General but truly cannot, since he does not understand a word the General utters in his sophisticated manner. When the exchange finally follows, after the General simplified his message, Balderick admits he is scared to take part in the military action. Melchett tries to instil some morale in Balderick saying that all the commanding officers will be right behind the front men, so there is nothing to be scared of. And it is finally a comment from *Black Adder* that provides a twist. He explains that the right behind in fact refers to miles away behind the real battle. This statement marks the trigger for two diverging mental spaces to be set up and corresponded, i.e. the mental space of WW1 as provided by the sketch

are positively upbeat in their nature. These usually accompany the wartime humour, which might suggest that the British prefer to make a joke of the horrendous events from the past in order to deal with it (for more see Jabłońska-Hood 2016b, pp. 94–97).

<sup>3</sup> In order to watch this sketch please visit the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejc1wwRGjFk>

and the reality of the First World War. In the former, we have silly generals and soldiers, who attended posh public schools and behave, or rather misbehave, like schoolboys who are supposed to be naughty and play tricks, sing stupid rhymes and laugh a lot, producing all speech in elevated public school jargon comprehensible only by the chosen few. We also have common soldiers, who exhibit real emotions and do not want to fight or die, as well as soldiers such as Black Adder, who realise the incompetence of the hierarchy and upper classes who lead to battle. This attitude allows us to switch to the latter, i.e. the real mental space of WW1 where British ordinary men were used in battle as cannon fodder for the amusement of their posh elite, who were stupid, useless and thought they could meddle with the lives of unimportant ordinary citizens, who in reality died by the thousands in the trenches, and were too young and scared to understand the trauma, and who only wanted to prolong their lives for a little while and exist in their innocence. The incongruity between the mental spaces that is preserved within the blend is so great that this time our laughter is not so vivid and unlimited as in the previous cases, but it is rather of a bitter kind, providing a comment on the harsh and unfair history, but still reconciling in its power. Through the character of Black Adder and his ironical, cynical attitude, we realise we can freely and without consequence scold the upper classes at power, and thus support the underdogs such as Balderick, who epitomise the innocence of the dead in the trenches and who provide criticism of the incompetent war management. It is via this bittersweet mockery that we glorify the brave and the innocent and truly scold the stupid who were put in authority. There is another feature of English humour that presents itself here, namely the lack of respect for any authority and the will to undermine it at any opportunity to gain superiority over the subject matter.

Below, I have presented a diagram showing the juxtaposition between the sketch characters and the historical past events of WW1. Whereas the army men in the sketch might be stupid and play war with other soldiers with no consideration for their feelings and lives, we realise that it is just an artificially created reality for the purpose of the comedy. However, the real traumatic situation of the First World War soldiers who were trapped in trenches and had no say in their existence, frequently at an impressionable age, certainly broadens the gap between the poetic licence and the history alluded to via the sketch. And yet, the striking contrast between the two and the incompatibilities result in the viewers' reconciliatory laughter, which simultaneously acts as homage paid towards the war victims.

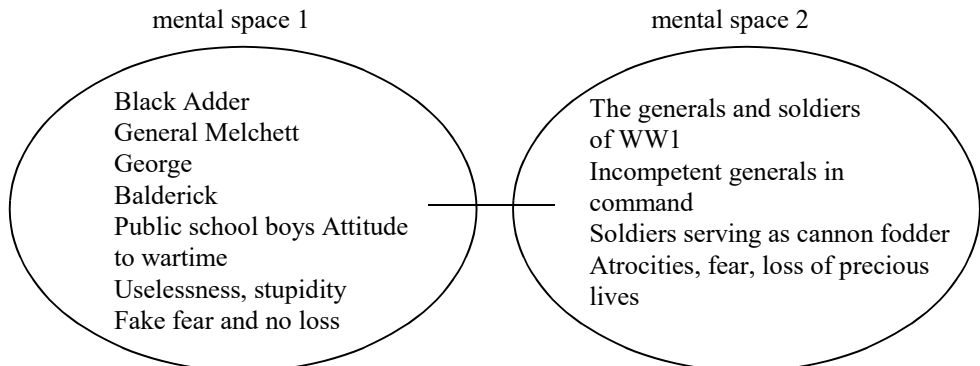


Figure 4. Black Adder and WW1: incongruities that ensure laughter.

## 6. Linguistic analysis of comedy in the selected material

It is crucial to remember that English comedy as a genre always displays comic effects on a few levels. I mean by that the fact that it will need to incorporate certain stylistic devices, which I refer to as verbal humour, e.g. wordplay or irony, etc. This constitutes the basic level of comedy, to my mind, which I shall refer to as the linguistic level. Additionally, there are other levels that are also incorporated into English humour, such as the pragmatic or contextual level, in which we are faced with elements of British history, culture or society (i.e. the encyclopaedic knowledge and/or the background knowledge) that are vital for the comprehension of comedy. For example, in order to blend the relevant mental spaces, as presented above, and to understand humour stemming from it, the viewer needs to activate this particular level of comedy (for more see the previous section). Finally, English humour will also frequently exhibit comedy at the performance level (we could name it the multimodal level of comedy, since it does not need to relate merely to the behaviour of characters and their roles, but it might also concern the visual effects, i.e. funny pictures or objects that we see during the comedy), and it is the conduct of the characters or certain entities they might possess that amount to their comical acts. All these levels intermingle and work best together, and for English humour to take place at its best, it is necessary to incorporate all of these at once. As far as I am concerned, English humour is highly specific, or even peculiar, because it tends to be complex at all these interlinked levels, which makes it difficult to understand, especially for those viewers who cannot access one of the enumerated levels, due to their lack of knowledge of the above.

Having discussed the blending of the mental spaces in the previous section, I would now like to proceed to a more linguistic, verbal account of the comedy in question, i.e. to the depiction of the verbal/linguistic humour. Because I am not able to submit the tapescripts of the complete sitcoms involved (for the shorter scenes, please find the tapescripts in the appendix section of the article), I will present only the most characteristic elements of the verbal play within the comedy in order to account for the manner in which language can become a part of the blending process in English comedy.

Firstly, I wish to display the list of exemplary stylistic devices that we need to access at this linguistic level, in order to do justice to comedy, the instantiations of which are briefly explained and exemplified below:

- **wordplay** is the literal play on words which functions as a form of wit and it may take different forms. Another name for it is punning, which can be described as a humorous use of a word or a phrase either by making a reference to two different meanings of it, or by using its homophones or homonyms for fun. In the scenes depicted for the analysis, we can distinguish many instances of wordplay. A good example is presented by the sketch *Mr Hilter*. The title itself is a pun of the Führer's name, and it is frequently mispronounced by the characters in the sketch in order to denote the real leader of the Nazis, who we find assuming the fictional name of Hilter. Simultaneously, Mr Hilter as a name brings immediate associations with Adolf Hitler. Similarly, the names of Hilter's companions are also puns: Ron Vibbentrop, who is really Von Ribbentrop, and Mr Heimlich Bimmler (at one point Hitler refers to him

as Reginald to anglicise his name, but at other occasions he forgets himself and starts referring to him by his first name), who ought to be known as Heimlich Himmler. Further, there is also the case of the person telephoning Mr Hilter in the B&B referred to as Mr McGoering, which is a clear allusion to another German politician during the Nazi regime, i.e. Hermann Göring. Along the same lines, Mr Hilter, who wants to win the elections in Minehead, London, refers to his political background as “bocialism”, clearly alluding to nationalism and its Nazi slant.

- **catchphrases:** this is a characteristic feature of most of English humour. The English seem to be especially fond of catchphrases. The viewer is to encounter repeated phrases, which appear to be attractive, and provide a kind of a frame for each sitcom or sketch that they form a part of. I would like to enumerate quite a few of these from different series: *Allo, Allo*: “Good morning” as mispronounced by a French police officer into “Good moaning”, “You stupid woman!” as uttered by Rene to his wife, Edith, whenever she caught him unawares betraying her, “It is I, Leclerc!” always produced by Mr Leclerc, who dresses up in different outfits and thinks he is inconspicuous, or Hans Geering’s utterance —“tler”, instead of saluting fully “Hail Hitler”, which was mistakenly taken for “Klop!”. In *Dad’s Army*, we also perceive catchphrases that enliven the series, e.g. “You stupid boy!”, as uttered by Mr Mainwaring to Pike, who is the youngest representative of the Territorial Army and happens to make serious faux pas fairly regularly.
- **pronunciation:** it is really important to mention that English humour will frequently resort to the mispronounced or confused words in English, as produced by non-native speakers of the language. In *Mr Hilter*, the title character does not pronounce the “w” sound in an English manner, but he utters it in a German way, thus revealing his true identity, which happens to be coinciding with the manner in which many German people speak English due to their mother tongue interferences (i.e. in German “w” is pronounced as “v”). In *Allo, Allo*, this feature has been exquisitely used by the screenwriters and actors. The plot takes place in the wartime, occupied France, and we encounter different nationalities there, i.e. the French, the English, the Germans and the Italians, all of whom speak English but with the features typical to each nationality, mispronouncing words so as to resemble the particular nationality’s trait features. For instance, the French do not pronounce the “th” sound in English, but rather they say “z/s” instead, the Germans do so too, yet their accent is to appear harder and more glottal than the French. A particular case in point is the French policeman Mr Crabtree, who actually confuses different vowels in his pronunciation and comes up with a plethora of ridiculous phrases, i.e. “Good moaning!” instead of “Good morning!”, or “Pardon me if I love you, but I have my dirty to do”, instead of “Pardon me if I leave you, but I have my dirty job to do”. This trick enriches humour, especially that the blended dualities between the actual pronunciation and the true, correct versions create a dichotomy that adds to other humorous incongruities of the series.
- **innuendo** is another name for sexual reference and this is certainly a favourite of the English. We find sexual innuendos in all English humour, and here are the chosen examples from the comedies I refer to. In *Allo, Allo*, a good

case in point is the policeman Crabtree, who misuses vowels in the English vocabulary, always changing their meaning and producing utterances with sexual innuendos, e.g. instead of describing the night as dark, he states: “It is a dick night”, or when he bluntly asks the local undertaker if he has a pleasure of talking to him thusly: “Am I ticking to Mr Alfons, the undertooker?” Similarly, Madame Fanny, the old woman and the mother of Rene’s wife, Edith, is often using sexual innuendos, e.g. when Edith tells her about Monsieur Alfons, who apparently is in love with Edith, and describes the man to her mother, mentioning his moustache, the elderly woman says: “Oh, yes, yes, I remember him well, he had a little stiff one”, referring to the moustache, yet the clumsy wording brings on the innuendo. Interestingly, Madame Fanny’s name already suggests the indecent connotations, too, which again boosts the verbal comedy. Moreover, in *Black Adder*, we also encounter sexual innuendos when George and the visiting general both sing a revised version of *Row the Boat* song. The lines to do with removing the trousers and the gesture implying the sexual intercourse are supposed to bring about the associations of indecency.

- **nonsense** is a truly English comedy feature, which, as the name itself suggests, implies the lack of sense in words, behaviour or a presented situation. This is a metier of the English and it can be observed in Monty Python’s sketch. When it comes to the verbal nonsense, the sketch finishes with the TV presenter uttering the nonsensical words as follows:

Foam at the mouth and fall over backwards. Is he foaming at the mouth to fall over backwards or falling over backwards to foam at the mouth. Tonight ‘Spectrum’ examines the whole question of frothing and falling, coughing and calling, screaming and bawling, walling and stalling, galling and mauling, palling and hauling, trawling and squalling and zalling. Zalling? Is there a word zalling? If there is what does it mean...if there isn’t what does it mean? Perhaps both. Maybe neither. What do I mean by the word mean? What do I mean by the word word, what do I mean by what do I mean, what do I mean by do, and what do I do by mean? What do I do by do and what do I do by wasting your time like this? Goodnight. (for full text see the appendix below)

The monologue starts with the comment on what has just occurred in the news about Mr Hilter, yet the speech turns into an incomprehensible “gobbledygook”, rather in the manner of the stream of consciousness without any meaning to it. The final repetition of the same words in a different sequence finally changes into a rhetorical question, and the presenter bids farewell to the viewer, which finishes the sketch then. Such a verbal nonsense is merely one of its kind. There is more of it in the same sketch, namely, the nonsensical behaviour of Mr Hilter and his colleagues, who at all costs wish to stay undercover, yet they wear German uniforms from WW2, which is striking in London, and somehow nobody seems to mind and be bothered by this fact. Additionally, they even speak German to each other, for instance, when Hitler is at a loss for words and cannot think of a term for hiking, he asks his friends in German and they provide him with the correct word. Also, when the Germans blurt out their identity, no English person seems to comprehend who they really are, e.g. when Himmler describes his career as a window cleaner, he also casually drops into the conversation that he served as the head of the Gestapo for many years or that he was not able to go to Nürnberg (which is taken as a good joke – adding more humour to the scene), or when McGoring calls

Hilter about the bombers to hire, etc. This conduct is absurd and makes for an amusing comedy for the English. In addition, such rationality and irrationality, as interlinked together, provide a certain dynamics for English humour, which again is its characteristic, stylistic device. Whether nonsense and rationality intertwined are of verbal and purely linguistic nature, or whether they refer to the conduct of the characters on the screen, it does not matter, as both appear to be equally appealing for the English.

- **irony** is a linguistic device which allows the speaker to say what he thinks is untrue in the manner that makes it sound as if it were actually a valid comment. This is a phenomenon for which the English are renowned in the world. A case in point is provided by Black Adder's remark pertaining to his soldier George, singing a silly song together with General Melchett and the fact that they both graduated from the public education system: "Fabulous. University education, you can't beat it". The song is usually sung by children, however, in this case, it has an innuendo, and we experience two grown-up men performing to it, who ought to be responsible and serious in the wartime situation. Hence, Black Adder's retort supposedly praising the value of the university education and actually laughing off the men can be classed as ironical. The contrary meaning of the statement is recognisable from Black Adder's deriding intonation, which is ignored by the other two.
- **sarcasm** is defined as a sharp or bitter remark meant to provide an offensive comment on someone or something. This is another typically English characteristic and we can find its exemplification in Black Adder, too. At the end of the visit to the trenches, General Melchett speaks with Baldrick, who admits to being petrified at the sheer thought of the war and fighting, to which Melchett responds by saying that there is no need to be afraid at all, as all the other high-ranking officers will be behind Baldrick in the war; the implication here is that they are waiting to rescue the army men, whenever needed. This, on the other hand, makes Black Adder sarcastically comment upon the reassurance, specifying the distance of the commanding squad behind the fighting army to be about 35 miles, which provides a reality check and a bitter comment on how little regard the top generals had for cannon fodder during the war. This sarcastic remark refers to what we could name the aristocratic code of honour, or rather dishonour, which again constitutes a characteristic feature of English humour. The laughter at the lack of honour on the part of the upper classes or aristocracy in charge of the country, the politicians, the royal family and all the mighty people who have a say in and influence how the UK is run has always been a beloved part of English comedy, thus providing a satirical comment on the stiff-upper-lip manner and snobbish upper classes, who presented themselves in a rather mediocre manner during conflicts and wars in British history, saving their own lives at the expense of the ordinary people. The reverberating motives of such cowardice and dishonour dressed in aristocratic robes seem to be a recurring motif within English humour, which the viewer expects and appreciates (there is more of such allusions in comedies such as Monty Python's *Holy Grail* and the *Flying Circus* sketches, and generally throughout the whole series of *Black Adder*, to mention just a few, however, due to the lack of space in the article, I shall only restrict myself to the above). Thus, undermining the authority

that is incapable of making crucial decisions seems to be amusing for the English, too.

- **dry humour** is known as a deadpan comedy and refers to the situation in which a person is using humour, e.g. a joke, but keeps their face straight and does not make any indication of the fact that they want to be comical. This is again a very English characteristic, and all English humour will necessarily involve that. In *Dad's Army*, for instance, Pike asks Mr Mainwaring during a presentation on German soldier types, which shows mainly ugly and ill-looking Nazis in uniforms and is thus stereotypical and boring for the soldiers to participate in, if there are any nice-looking Germans, which Mr Mainwaring denies with a serious straight face. At the same time, Wilson, who reads the descriptions of the pictures, wears a monocle, a similar one to those that the German high-ranking officers wore in the wartime, again with a straight face. Still more, when they discuss the German parachute jumper who has a low crotch in the uniform, they all speculate straight-facedly about the reason behind the low cut, bringing in sexual allusions to the men's genital area.

Let us now focus on the multimodal/performance level of English humour, where we encounter the following:

- **slapstick** is a kind of comedy with exaggerated performance and usually involving accidents with the help of some objects, for instance when a clown slips on a banana skin and falls spectacularly down with a loud noise. Among the many scenes that involve slapstick, I would like to point to the one from *Allo, Allo* where the French Resistance movement together with Rene and his people attempt at freeing the Englishmen and participate in numerous adventures, which are ridiculous and include slapstick, e.g. using the radio station hidden under Madame Fanny's bed and its operating necessitates lifting the bed in which the poor old lady is placed.
- **exaggeration**: this feature mostly concerns the conduct of certain characters, and, via its repeatability, it generates laughter. It usually has to do with some irritating quality in a character's behaviour that becomes predictable, irritating and funny, when exposed once too many times. A case in point is *Dad's Army*, where we encounter an elderly soldier who is known to utter the words: "Don't panic" in stressful situations, yet he is the only one that truly panics, strutting around, frequently equipped with a gun and repeating the same cliché phrase to all the other characters, who do not seem to be so affected in comparison. This repeated pattern of behaviour borders on the mechanical and one might even risk a statement that it is awaited. The viewer expects the phrase to crop up in certain moments, which actually creates the dichotomy between what ought to be unexpected in humour (and hence amusing) and what really is predictable and expected. The routine repetitions, then, seem to add to the funniness, too. Also, in *Allo, Allo*, we encounter exaggeration when Rene's wife expresses her wish to sing, despite the fact that she does not have a talent in this respect and actually sings terribly to the shock and horror of all the other characters. As before, the repeated, exaggerated and irritating habit makes us laugh at the misery of those who need to endure it on every possible occasion.
- **farce** is a type of comedy where the characters are involved in a set of unbelievable and ridiculous happenings and take it seriously. A good example

of that is the scene in *Allo, Allo* where two English airmen are to be escorted to be rescued from France dressed as a cow, one forming her front and the other, the rear. All the characters follow the plan devised by the French Resistance, and the Germans who see the French with the cow do not seem at all suspicious, despite the fact that the animal does not look very lifelike.

- **black humour** is a type of comedy that involves references to taboo matters such as death and funerals, etc. It is exemplified by Monsieur Alfonse from *Allo, Allo* who is an undertaker and epitomises the references to death via his profession. He is exceptionally fond of his job and treats it too seriously; he likes to boast about what he does and how he lives, e.g. when he proposes to Edith, thinking that Rene has died, he enumerates his assets, one of these being the fact that he has a lovely flat above the morgue. His is absurd in his style as he always wears a black suit and an undertaker's black hat. He is also pale and resembles a person who is not very well, looking deathly, as one might describe his attire. This character makes the taboo subject of death a mockery in the series. Another example of black humour can be found in the sketch *Mr Hilter*, where a random woman states she gave her baby to Mr Hilter to kiss, and he bit it, which in itself is absurd and ridiculous, especially for a by-election candidate.
- **grotesque** as a genre is the combination of the two opposing elements, the comic and the tragic, which is actually to be found in all the analysed comedies. Specifically, in all the scenes we have the tragic subject of the war that is tackled in a light-hearted manner.
- the **objects/pictures/drawings**, etc. that are funny bring a multimodal dimension to comedy, too. A good instance is provided by the painting from *Allo, Allo* entitled *Madonna with the Big Boobies*, which is a mediocre and obscure painting showing a lady with a bare breast, and which, by its discrepancy with the idea of wartime treasures of great value that were stolen by the real Nazis, creates amusement. Furthermore, in the sketch *Mr Hilter*, we are presented with an election campaign, where the sign advertising the candidate actually says Mr Hitler, and there are arrows above the letters l and t reversing their order, which is clearly discernible and adds also to the nonsensical level of the comedy. Also, in this example we are constantly shown the German uniforms, Hitler's moustache or the map of Stalingrad that direct the viewer's attention to the truth about the election candidate, too, simultaneously adding to the comedy in question.
- **stereotyping**: this feature is associated with many different elements of the sitcom. Firstly, in *Allo, Allo*, we are faced with the stereotypical German soldiers dressed in their uniforms, or the Gestapo wearing black leather clothes and black hats. Here, Her Flick and his companion, Von Smallhausen, are, by comparison, also funny: one is large, whereas the other one is little, their posture and its incongruity also creates amusement. Similarly, they wear exactly the same clothes, and the little one walks with a limp despite the fact there is nothing wrong with him. He walks with a cane, just like his bigger friend, who actually has a problem walking and needs the help of a walking stick. All such discrepancies accumulate and result in humour. Along the same lines, we are presented with the stereotypical French, e.g. Rene and his wife, who run a coffee shop and can only think of eating or drinking, even during the war.

Let alone the Resistance movement embodied by Michelle and her girls, who again all wear exactly the same clothes: navy berets, beige trench coats, dark skirts, white socks and dark Mary Janes. Apart from that, all the characters appear out of the blue in strange places when they wish to communicate with Rene and his gang, and Michelle always uses the cliché: “Listen carefully, I shall say it only once”. When compared and contrasted with the real wartime French people and their conduct, such stereotyping again reinforces the comic effects. Further, in *Mr Hilter*, we also perceive the Nazi uniforms and symbols, Hitler’s moustache or Himmler’s monocle and his characteristic smirk that are stereotyped to signify the cruelty on the part of the German army during the war and exaggerated, and thus create funniness.

## 7. Conclusions

Having depicted all the examples, I want to sum up the analysis, referring back to the notion of English humour as seen from the cognitive perspective of blending. As far as the conceptual integration theory is concerned, it is possible to notice that each example of comedy hinges on the blend of two mental spaces, the first one being the historical past and the second one being the distorted image of that past in the form of the comedy’s frame. In other words, we can observe the intermingling of reality and fiction, which is an interesting manoeuvre on the part of the humour creators. Partly, it simplifies the reception of the comic due to the fact that it is based on the past events to which the viewers can relate. Further, upon the blending of the two mental spaces and their inputs, we arrive at striking incongruities that we could not have foreseen, and this element of a surprising contrast prompts laughter. Further, the typically linguistic analysis of the chosen material reveals the numerous stylistic devices that operate within English humour on many levels (linguistic, contextual or multimodal), and thus forge its specificity. Among these, it is important to enumerate the following linguistic operations: wordplay, irony, nonsense, innuendos, black humour, slapstick, farce or grotesque; the pragmatic level involves heavy references to culture, history, up-to-the-moment affairs, etc.; and finally, the multimodal level links the visual or performance elements together with the verbal ones, e.g. drawings, slapstick, or farce. To sum up, the more of such manoeuvres are employed among various levels of humour, the better and funnier the comic effects.

One more remark needs to be made in respect of the English love of the irrational and nonsensical. This feature is by far the most difficult to encompass for the non-native speakers, who might shun or criticise English humour in this light for not being amusing in the least. Nonetheless, this characteristic delight in nonsense stems from the historical past, too. Specifically, after the world wars, the English found themselves completely devastated at the unspeakable horrors of the experience, and in order to deal with that baggage, the comedy groups that appeared publically attempted to involve nonsense in their comedy, the very nonsense that symbolises the lack of meaning of war and conflict, of the loss of life and war atrocities. A case in point is the group called *The Goons*, or

*The Goon Show*, which was broadcast nationwide by the BBC. This established the tradition of nonsense humour, which was later continued by other comedy creators, for example by Monty Python. I also claim that the Anglican upbringing as well as public education with their deep emphasis of pragmatism and common sense cognition have bolstered the love of nonsense in comedy, where the ridiculous or the absurd, as taken to the extremes, provide an outlet for pent-up emotions and criticism of anything that is not logical or common sense.

Additionally, it is also feasible to make some observations surrounding the notion of English humour. Incidentally, it exhibits the qualities that are projected onto the national identity of the inhabitants of the UK. Specifically, it can relate to any topic, no matter how taboo it is in its nature (hence numerous innuendos); it concerns the beloved character of the underdog, who is a failure, but in some way manages to succeed eventually, even if in having the last laugh or a stroke of luck, by mistake, for instance. The underdog is someone who is innocent and true at heart, resourceful, determined and resilient to any adversity, who might be peculiar in their ways, but that is viewed as positive. In fact, the more peculiar the topic, characters and manner of the presentation of English comedy, the better; hence, the motif of ridiculous incongruities and extremes that are featured in it. Also, the interest of English comedy lies within the historical and cultural events from any period in time (e.g. public schooling system in Great Britain), especially those moments that concerned the British. This realistic element allows for the reference of the comic to be linked with the perspective of its viewer, who is concerned, knowledgeable and eager to decipher any possible hidden allusions to real events. This characteristic provides for the intellectual level of English comedy, which is oftentimes misunderstood, or, simply, not understood at all, due to multiple references to very recent or alternatively historically distant events from the life of the British (a feature of very modern comedy). In addition to that, we can find interest in the zany and bizarre take on well-known facts, as well as criticism of the authority or the upper classes. The British love to undermine authority, which is closely associated with their love of freedom, thus comedy can sometimes become the speaking grounds in order to comment on the difficult and almost unspeakable, such as world wars with their toll, or the dishonour on the part of aristocracy breaking the code of honourable conduct in wars by sending cannon fodder to fight and showing cowardice or bravado when least needed. All these features of English comedy may, in my opinion, be projected onto the national identity of the British these days. I mean by that the idea that via their comedy and sense of humour, the British formulate their national identity in that they love freedom, criticise authority, discuss taboos and difficult matters, accept the bizarre and peculiar in their lives. They are the nation of underdogs, who could not possibly think highly of themselves, but are rather humble in their opinions on selfhood and very often laugh at themselves and their history. This final self-deprecating quality of both English humour and the national identity of the British is particularly important, as it provides an objective vantage point on their existence and allows keeping the cosy distance, which boosts positive attitudes, determination and resilience. All this finally culminates in the ability to have the last laugh over something, no matter how serious or grave. This last laugh truly encapsulates the Englishness and their selfhood, which is inextricably linked to and makes sense in the light of English humour shaping and reshaping the national

identity of the British, drawing on their glorious past (Richards 2007, pp. 352–366), allowing them to gain superiority in any situation via the cognitive conscious effort to keep a light heart, carry on and have a laugh, even if it is the only thing they will or can do right. This, on the other hand, generates a great deal of national pride, superiority and freedom that dates back to the Empire and gentlemanly ideal of an English noble man with impeccable manners and a successful, rich character to be envied. Thus, it is as if the history took the full circle and took the British back to their chivalric attitudes with regard to their selfhood, nationality, and, above all, their identity. As Richards states, after Steiner: “Images and symbolic constructs of the past are imprinted, almost in the manner of genetic information, on our sensibility. Each new historical era mirrors itself in the picture and activates mythology of its past...It tests its sense of identity, of progress or new achievement against the past” (Ibidem, p. 364).

In this way, English humour, which could be regarded as an almost genetic characteristic feature of the British, brings about the politics of nostalgia to incessantly create and recreate the national ideal of the British people rooted in their glorious past. All this is conducted for the sake of the survival of the nation’s spirit so that the future generations will possess shared memories and values that will, in a definite manner, constitute a community, selfhood, and finally, and most importantly, a common national identity.

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## Appendix

### The script of the Monty Python sketch entitled *Mr Hilter*:

[the source of the text: <https://www.ibras.dk/montypython/episode12.htm#4>]

SUPERIMPOSED CAPTION:

‘A SMALL BOARDING  
HOUSE IN MINEHEAD,  
SOMERSET’

*Mr and Mrs Johnson, a typical  
holidaying bourgeois couple  
walk up to the front door and  
ring the bell. Inside the boarding  
house, the landlady goes up to  
the front door and opens it.*

Landlady	Hello, Mr and Mrs Johnson?
Mr Johnson	That’s right. Yes.
Landlady	Well come on in, excuse me not shaking hands, I’ve just been putting a bit of lard on the cat’s boil.
Johnson	Very nice.
Landlady	Well you must be tired, it’s a long way from Coventry, isn’t it?
Johnson	Well, we usually reckon on five and a half hours and it took us six hours and fifty-three minutes, with the twenty-five minute stop at Frampton Cottrell to stretch our legs, only we had to wait half an hour to get onto the M5 at Droitwich.
Landlady	Really?
Johnson	Then there was a three mile queue just before Bridgewater on the A38. We usually come round on the B3339 just before Bridgewater, you see...
Landlady	Really?
Johnson	Ye, but this time we decided to risk it because they’re always saying they’re going to widen it there.
Landlady	Are they?
Johnson	Yes well just by the intersection, there where the A372 joins up, there’s plenty of room to widen it there, there’s only grass verges. They could get another six feet...knock down that hospital... Then we took the coast road through Williton and got all the Taunton traffic on the A358 from Crowcombe and Stogumber...
Landlady	Well you must be dying for a cup of tea.

- Johnson Well, wouldn't say no, not if it's warm and wet.
- Landlady Well come on in the lounge, I'm just going to serve afternoon tea.
- Johnson *(following her into the lounge)* Very nice.  
*In the lounge are sitting another bourgeois couple Mr and Mrs Phillips.*
- Landlady Come on in, Mr and Mrs Johnson, oh this is Mr and Mrs Phillips.
- Mr Phillips Good afternoon.
- Johnson Thank you.
- Landlady It's their third time here with us, we can't keep you away can we? Ha, ha, and over here is Mr Hilter.  
*Landlady leads Mr and Mrs Johnson over to a table at which Adolf Hitler is sitting poring over a map. He is in full Nazi uniform. Himmler and Von Ribbentrop are also sitting at the table with him, Himmler in Nazi uniform and von Ribbentrop in evening dress, with an Iron Cross.*
- Hitler Ach. Good time...good afternoon.
- Landlady Ooh planning a little excursion are we Mr Hilter?
- Hitler Ja, ja. We haff a little... *(to others)* Was ist rückweise bewegen?
- Von Ribbentrop Hike.
- Himmler Hiking.
- Hitler Ah yes, we make a little hike for, for Bideford.
- Johnson *(leaning over map)* Oh well, you'll want the A39 then...no, no, you've got the wrong map there, this is Stalingrad, you want the Ilfracombe and Barnstaple section.
- Hitler Ah! Hein...Reginald you have the wrong map here you silly old leg-before-wicket English person.
- Himmler I'm sorry mein Fuhrer. I did not...*(Hitler slaps him)* Mein Dickie old chum.
- Landlady Lucky Mr Johnson pointed that out, eh? You wouldn't have had much fun in Stalingrad, would you...*(they don't see the joke)* I said, you wouldn't have had much fun in Stalingrad, would you, ha, ha, ha?
- Hitler *(through clenched teeth)* Not much fun in Stalingrad, no.
- Landlady Oh I'm sorry I didn't introduce you. This is Ron...Ron Vibbentrop.
- Johnson Oh, not Von Ribbentrop, eh?
- Von Ribbentrop *(leaping two feet in the air, then realizing)* Nein! Nein! Nein! Oh!! Ha, ha, ha.

- Landlady And this is the quiet one, Mr Bimmler – Heimlich Bimmler.
- Himmler How do you do there squire, also I am not Minehead lad but I in Peterborough, Lincolnshire was given birth to, but stay in Peterborough Lincolnshire house all during war, owing to nasty running sores, and was unable to go in the streets play football or go to Nürnberg. I am retired window cleaner and pacifist, without doing war crimes (*hurriedly corrects himself*) tch tch tch, and am glad England win World Cup – Bobby Charlton, Martin Peters – and eating lots of chips and fish and hole in the toads, and Dundee cakes on Piccadilly line. Don't you know old chap I was head of Gestapo for ten years. Five years! No, no, nein, I was not head of Gestapo at all... I make joke.
- Landlady Oooh, Mr Bimmler, you do have us on. (*A telephone rings*) Oh excuse me I must go and answer that. (*leaves the room*)
- Johnson How long are you down here for, Mr Hilter. Just the fortnight?
- Hitler (*shouting*) Why do you ask that? Are you a spy or something? (*drawing revolver*) Get over there against the wall Britischer pig, you're going to die!  
*Von Ribbentrop og Himmler grab Hitler and calm him.*
- Himmler Take it easy Dickie old chum.
- Von Ribbentrop I'm sorry Mr. Johnson, he's a bit on edge. He hasn't slept since 1945.
- Hitler Shut your cake hole you Nazi.
- Von Ribbentrop Cool it Führer cat!
- Himmler Ha, ha, ha. (*laughing it off*) The fun we have.
- Johnson Haven't I seen him on the television?
- Von Ribbentrop and Himmler Nicht. Nein. Nein, oh no.
- Johnson Television Doctor?
- Von Ribbentrop No!!! No!  
*The landlady enters.*
- Landlady Telephone, Mr Hilter, it's that nice Mr McGoering from the Bell and Compasses. He says he's found a place where you can hire bombers by the hour.
- Hitler If he opens his big mouth again...it's lampshade time!
- Von Ribbentrop (*controlling Hitler and getting him towards the door*) Shut up! (*Hitler exits*) Hire bombers by the hour, ha ha, what a laugh he is, that Scottish person. Good old Norman. (*he exits*)
- Landlady He's on the phone the whole time nowadays.

- Johnson In business is he?
- Himmler Soon baby!
- Landlady Of course it's his big day Thursday. Oh, they've been planning it for months.
- Johnson What's happens then?
- Landlady Well it's the North Minehead bye-election. Mr Hilter's standing as the National Socialist candidate. He's got wonderful plans for Minehead.
- Johnson Like what?
- Landlady Well, for a start he wants to annex Poland.
- Johnson Oh, North Minehead's Conservative, isn't it?
- Landlady Well, they get a lot of people at their rallies.
- Johnson Rallies?
- Landlady Well, their Bocalist meetings, down at the Axis Café in Rosedale Road.
- Cut to a grotty Italian café. Sign above it read 'Axis Café, Italian Food a Specialty'. A figure clearly belonging to Mussolini is nailing up a sign or poster which reads: 'Vote for Hitler'. He looks around and goes into the café furtively. At this moment past the café come Hitler, Von Ribbentrop and Himmler on bikes. Hitler at the front shouting German through a megaphone. Von Ribbentrop at the back with a large banner 'Hilter for a better Meinhead'. Himmler in the middle with an old grammophone playing 'Deutschland Über Alles'. Cut to Hitler ranting in German on a balcony with Himmler at his side. Beneath them is a Nazi flag.*
- Hitler I am not a racialist, but, und this is a big but, we in the National Socialist Party believe das Überleben muss gestammen sein mit der schneaky Armstrong-Jones. Historische Taunton ist Volkermeinig von Meinhead.
- Himmler *(stepping forward)* Mr Hitler, *Hilter*, he says that historically Taunton is a part of Minehead already. *Shot of a yokel looking disbelievingly at balcony. Von Ribbentrop appears behind.*
- Von Ribbentrop He's right, do you know that?  
*Meanwhile back on the balcony.*
- Hitler *(very excited)* Und Bridgwater ist die letzte Fühlung das wir haben in Somerset!  
*Over this we hear loud applause and 'Sieg Heils'. The yokel, who is not applauding, turns round rather surprised to see whence cometh the applause. He sees Von Ribbentrop operating a grammophone. Cut to vox pops.*

- Interviewer (voice over) What do you think of Mr Hilter's politics.
- Yokel I don't like the sound of these 'ere boncentration bamps.
- Pepperpot Well, I gave him my baby to kiss and he bit it on the head.
- Stockbroker Well, I think he'd do a lot of good to the Stock Exchange.
- Pepperpot No...no...
- Himmler (thinly disguised as yokel) Oh yes Britischer pals he is wunderbar...ful. So.
- Pepperpot I think he's right about the coons, but then I'm a bit mental.
- Gumby I think he's got beautiful legs!
- Madd Well speaking as Conservative candidate I just drone on and on and on...never letting anyone else get a word in edgeways, until I start foaming at the mouth and fall over backwards. (he foams at the mouth and falls over backwards)
- Presenter *Cut to 'Spectrum' studio: same presenter as before, sitting at desk.*  
Foam at the mouth and fall over backwards. Is he foaming at the mouth to fall over backwards or falling over backwards to foam at the mouth. Tonight 'Spectrum' examines the whole question of frothing and falling, coughing and calling, screaming and bawling, walling and stalling, galling and mauling, palling and hauling, trawling and squalling and zalling. Zalling? Is there a word zalling? If there is what does it mean... if there isn't what does it mean? Perhaps both. Maybe neither. What do I mean by the word mean? What do I mean by the word word, what do I mean by what do I mean, what do I mean by do, and what do I do by mean? What do I do by do by do and what do I do by wasting your time like this? Goodnight.  
*Cut to police station.*
- First Sergeant (behind station counter into camera) Goodnight.

**The script of the Black Adder sketch entitled *General Melchett visits the troops:***  
[General Melchett makes an informal visit to the trenches]

- Black Adder: General Melchett will be here at any moment. When he arrives, leave the talking to me, alright?  
I like to keep an informal trench, as you know, but today you must only speak with my express permission.  
Is that clear?  
Is that clear?  
Permission to speak...

The soldiers: Yes sir! Absolutely sir! Yes!

A soldier: Attention!  
Dugout, attention!

General Melchett: Excellent. At ease. Now then Black Adder... Where would you like me to sit?  
I thought just a trim of the moustache today, nothing drastic.

Soldier: No sir, we're here about the paintings, sir...

General Melchett: Oh yes! Of course. Good lord, George! Hahaha, how are you, my boy?  
I said how are you?

Black Adder: Permission to speak.

George: Absolutely top hull, sir! With a ying, and a yang, and a yippedeedoo!

General Melchett: Splendid! And your uncle Bertie sends his regards. I told him you could have a week off in April... Don't want you missing the boat race, do we?

Black Adder: Permission to speak.

George: Certainly not! Permission to sing boisterously, sir?

Black Adder: If you must...

(George sings and General Melchett joins in): Row, row, row your pants. Gently down the stream... Belts off, trousers down, isn't life a scream? Ow!

Black Adder: Fabulous. University education, you can't beat it.

General Melchett: Bravo! Now, what have we here? Name?

Black Adder: Permission to speak.

Baldrick: Baldrick, sir.

General Melchett: Good, tally ho yippedeedap and a zing-zang-zpilip!  
Looking forward to bullying off for the final chucka?

Black Adder: Permission to speak.

Black Adder: Answer the general, Baldrick.

Baldrick: I can't answer him, sir, I don't know what he's talking about.

General Melchett: Haha! Are you looking forward to the big push?

Baldrick: No sir, I'm absolutely terrified.

General Melchett: Don't worry, my boy. If you should falter, remember that Captain Darling and I are behind you.

Black Adder: About 35 miles behind you.