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The mutual stereotypes of English, French and Polish people in their proverbs

Introduction

Many traditional proverbs reflect national and ethnic stereotypes, in particular those involving neighbouring countries and the countries which are historically or politically connected. Geographical closeness and historical ties between France and England resulted in the appearance of numerous proverbs, maxims and literary texts illustrating their common experience and mutual stereotypes. References to Poland are naturally less common in French and English proverbs, but both France and England are stereotyped in Polish proverbs. Interestingly, stereotyped views of many nations seem to be relatively uniform across Europe (DUNDES 1994), and survive in the form of traditional priamels listing stereotypical attributes of a number of nations. Many priamels originated in medieval Latin, and were later translated into national languages gaining international currency. The present paper is an attempt to illustrate the stereotypes of Englishmen, Frenchmen and Poles reflected in traditional priamels and other types of English, French and Polish proverbs.

National stereotypes and the notion of 'national character'

Stereotypes are usually perceived as harmful generalizations which should be avoided. However, as Bartmiński (2007 : 107) observes, there is no escape from them because they constitute an inherent part of language. They

are found in many lexical and phraseological units, including proverbs. Linguistic stereotypes provide descriptive and normative models, conventional images of objects and ideas, and as such, they facilitate thinking and talking about the world (BARTMIŃSKI 2007 : 73).

Linguistic stereotypes are not limited to nations and ethnic groups, but national stereotypes are among the most widely discussed, which probably results from the fact nationality is considered by many people to be the most important criterion in self-identification (BARTMIŃSKI 2006 : 209; 2007 : 13). National stereotypes are social constructs: they are formed in the process of constructing reality by members of a given community, and passed from generation to generation. Berting and Villain-Gandossi (1995 : 17-25) claim even though national stereotypes are subject to constant reinterpretation and reconstruction, they tend to be persistent and unchangeable. They have a number of important social functions: they serve as indicators of a nation's position among other countries and constitute an element of national identity. They strengthen ties between members of a given community, emphasizing their shared values and contrasting them with the values and behaviour patterns of other nations. Thus, stereotypes of other nations are closely related to the nation's auto-stereotype (BERTING /VILLAIN-GANDOSSI 1995 : 23).

National stereotypes are often discussed in the context of 'national character'. The concept itself is rather problematic and the numerous attempts at research into the reflection of 'national character' in proverbs have been severely criticized (cf. ROZUMKO 2009). 'National character' may be defined as a set of qualities which are specific to certain nations: qualities which are not genetically determined but shaped by social, cultural and historical factors, and attested with varying degrees in representatives of a given nation. Wierzbicka observes that "national character is shaped, to a considerable extent, by a nation's history. It is, therefore not eternal or unchangeable. It responds to changes in a nation's history, as does a nation's language, which is a mirror as well as a vehicle of both history and national character" (WIERZBICKA 1992 : 443). Naturally, within all groups "there will be variations, inconsistencies, differences" and, in consequence, "any claims about worldview are necessarily a synthesis and generalization of these nuances" (LAU 2003 : 235). This synthetic and nonspecific nature of 'national character', combined with the rather common fear of 'stereotyping' (observed by WIERZBICKA 2006 : 3, in relation to intercultural semantics and pragmatics) has resulted in the rather low profile of the concept in paremiological research.

Stereotypical views of English, French and Polish people in traditional priamels

Many European proverbs expressing national stereotypes originated in the Middle Ages. They were usually created in Latin, the medieval *lingua franca*; and some of them were translated with some local modifications into national languages. They seem to have enjoyed the greatest popularity in the 16th and 17th centuries (ŚWIERCZYŃSKA 1996), but many of them were also created later. Most of those early proverbs have the form of priamels, i.e. proverbs listing qualities of several (usually three) nations, or humourously comparing the stereotypical behaviour of some nations in certain situations, e.g.: *The German originates it, the Frenchman imitates it, and the English exploits it*. This wording of the proverb is found in German (DUNDES 1994 : 196). In Polish sources, the proverb has the following form: *Anglik zmyśli, Francuz wykona, Niemiec udoskonali, a Polak głupi wszystko kupi* [*Polak przyjdzie, pochwali i kupi*] ‘The Englishman conceives it; the Frenchman realizes it; the German improves it, and the Pole seizes upon it and buys it’, or in a more extended version: ‘What an Englishman cares to invent, a Frenchman to design, or a German to patch together, the stupid Pole will buy and the Russian will deprive him of it’ (DUNDES 1994 : 196).

Priamels usually consisted of three elements, but, as Szpila (2003 : 80) observes, there are also those consisting of two, four, ten or even fourteen elements, such as the following Polish proverbial texts (KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978):

W Hiszpanii praktyk, we Włoszech doktor, we Francji fryzjerz, w Niemczech rzemieślnik, w Danii, w Anglii, w Szkocji kupiec, w Wołoszech złodziej, w Turczech żołnierz, w Polsce prokurator, w Moskwie łgarz, w Prusiech gospodarz: pożywią się. ‘In Spain a practitioner, in Italy a doctor, in France a hairdresser, in Germany a craftsman, in Denmark, in England, in Scotland a merchant, in Wallachia a thief, in Turkey a soldier, in Poland a prosecutor, in Moscow a liar, in Prussia a farmer: will earn their bread.’

Hiszpańska prostota, włoska hojność, polski rząd, pruskie dworstwo, duńskie państwo, angielska wolność, francuski wstyd, niemiecka pokora, szkocki wczas, moskiewskie słowo, tureckie małżeństwo, wołoska wierność, żydowskie nabożeństwo, ariańska miłość – to są wszystko podejrzane rzeczy. ‘Spanish plainness, Italian generosity, Polish government, Prussian court, Danish state, English freedom, French shame, German modesty, Scottish comfort/

rest, Moscowian word, Turkish marriage, Wallachian faithfulness, Jewish devoutness, Arian love – these are all suspicious things’.

References to French people are frequent in Polish priamels; stereotypical attributes of the English are less often included in such proverbial listings. Krzyżanowski (1969–1978) lists the following priamels stereotyping French people:

Polski most, niemiecki post, francuskie małżeństwo, czyste błażeństwo ‘A Polish bridge, a German fast, a French marriage – are only to be laughed at’;

We Włoszech się uczyć, we Francji dyskurować, a w Polsce bankietować ‘Italy is good for studying, France for discoursing/debating, and Poland for partying’;

Co Włoch to doktor, co Niemiec to kupiec, co Francuz to dworak, co Polak to hetman (rycerz) ‘Every Italian is a doctor, every German is a merchant, every French is a courtier, every Pole is a knight’;

Włoskie trele, francuskie fortele, niemieckie serdele – kosztują Polaków wiele ‘Italian music, French stratagems, German food – cost Poles a lot’;

Francuz gdy głodny to śpiewa, a Polak głodny się gniewa ‘When a Frenchman is hungry, he sings; when a Pole is hungry, he is angry’.

A stereotypical Frenchman emerging from these proverbs is thus a shameless, cunning, outspoken, lighthearted courtier, showing no respect for traditional marriage. The proverb *Włoskie trele, francuskie fortele, niemieckie serdele – kosztują Polaków wiele* (roughly: ‘Italian music, French stratagems, German food – cost Poles a lot’) illustrates the Polish fascination with foreign countries, including France, and, combined with proverbs about the bad quality of Polish bridges and government, and the stupidity of Poles, it seems to suggest the feeling of inferiority towards western European countries. Some of these proverbs are similar in content to French proverbial texts, e.g.: *En France tout finit par des chansons* ‘In France everything ends with a song’ or *Le peuple français est frivole dans ses amusements, mais solide et grave dans ses goûts* ‘The French are frivolous when it comes to amusement, but solid and grave when it comes to taste’ (STAWIŃSKA 2004 : 132).

References to English people appear in only three of the proverbs quoted above: the English are presented as ingenious people, good at inventing

things; and England as a country where merchants live a prosperous life, and where freedom is not respected.

Proverbial comparisons including French and English people are common in western European proverbs (cf. DUNDES 1994), while Poles are more frequently stereotyped in eastern European proverbs (cf. STRUMIŃSKI 1995). Stereotypical attributes of Poles found in Ukrainian proverbs are similar to those reflected in Polish proverbs: Poles are presented as stupid; references are made to the bad condition of Polish roads and bridges, and Poland is said to be in the state of mess and chaos (STRUMIŃSKI 1995). Western European proverbs present the French as vain people, foolish-looking but wise (though sometimes wise after the deed), great chefs, living in a permissive country. English people are characterized by their respect for the law, coldness and inability to show their intelligence:

*The French Courage proceeds from vanity – the German from phlegm
– the English from coolness – the Dutch from obstinacy – the Russian from
insensibility – but the Italian from anger.*

(an English text attributed to Lord Byron, quoted in YAPP 1983 : 133)

*An Italian traveler used to say that the Portuguese seems a fool and is so;
The Spaniard seems wise and is a fool;
The Frenchman seems a fool and is wise;
The Englishman is wise but cannot show it;
The Italian both is wise and seems so,
And the Dutchman would be wise but for the pot.*

(a French proverb quoted in DUNDES 1994 : 197)

*In England everything is permitted that's not forbidden.
In Germany everything is forbidden that's not permitted.
In France everything is permitted, even if it's forbidden.
In Russia everything is forbidden, even if it's permitted.*

(a German proverb quoted in DUNDES 1994 : 198)

*Among three Italians will be found two clergymen;
Among three Spaniards, two braggarts;
Among three Germans, two soldiers;
Among three Frenchmen, two chefs;
And among three Englishmen, two whoremongers.*

(a German text quoted in DUNDES 1994 : 196)

*The Italians are wise before the deed, the Germans in the deed,
the French after the deed.*

(an Italian proverb quoted in YAPP 1983 : 133)

*La France chante faux et pense juste; l'Allemand chante juste et pense faux;
l'Italien ne pense pas, mais il chante* ('France sings out of tune [falsely] but
thinks in tune [rightly]. A German sings in tune [rightly] but thinks out of
tune [falsely], an Italian doesn't think but he sings')

(STAWIŃSKA 2004 : 132)

Dundes (1994 : 202) claims that the stereotypical attributes of English, French and Polish people are rather consistent in proverbs and other kinds of verbal folklore: French people are concerned with cooking and love-making, the English are unduly concerned with propriety and cold in interpersonal relations, while Poles are stupid. A modern priamel-like text reported by Berger (n.d.) seems to confirm Dundes's view:

*Heaven is where the police are British, the chefs are French, the mechanics are
German, the lovers are Italian and it is all organized by the Swiss. Hell is where
the police are German, the chefs are British, the mechanics French, the lowers are
Swiss and it is all organized by Italians.*

Many modern jokes which summarise stereotypical views of various nations resemble traditional *priamels*. Compare, for example, the following 18th century saying reported by Yapp (1983 : 133): *In settling an island, the first building erected by a Spaniard will be a church; by a Frenchman a fort; by a Dutchman a warehouse; and by an Englishman an alehouse* with the modern joke below quoted by Dundes (1994 : 188):

*A ship goes down in the Pacific. Nobody survives except two men and a woman.
They save themselves on a small island. What happens if the two men are Italian?
The one murders the other in order to possess the woman for himself. If they are
Frenchmen, they live peacefully a trois. If they are English or Germans, then the
men move to another island and leave the woman alone. If they are Russians,
they set a bottle afloat for Moscow for further instructions.*

National and ethnic stereotypes also provide basis for riddles or pseudo-riddles, for example the cross-breed riddle, such as the following: *What would the son of a Jewish mother and a Polish father would be? – A jani-*

tor in a medical school (DUNDES 1994 : 193). Many jokes of this type involving the stereotype of a stupid Pole have become part of American folklore.

Berger (1993) explains the popularity of humour based on ethnic stereotypes with reference to Freud's notion of humour as masked aggression. In Berger's view, telling jokes with stereotyping in them involves differences in power between those who tell the jokes and the groups that are being stereotyped. Those differences in power are not necessarily real, but they make people who tell such jokes feel superior to those who they are stereotyping. At the same time, the absurdity of many of such jokes make them superficially innocent, which is why some people tell these jokes without feeling any anxiety.

The mutual stereotypes of English and French people

The role of national stereotypes as indicators of a nation's position among other countries mentioned by Berting and Villain-Gandossi (1995 : 23) seems to be particularly apparent in the case of mutual stereotypes of the English and the French. The English tend to define themselves contrasting their real or imagined qualities with those of the French, e.g.:

Frenchmen live as if they were never to die. Englishmen die all their lives.

(Philip Thicknesse, 1789, quoted in YAPP 1983 : 133)

The difference between the vanity of a Frenchman and an Englishman seems to be this: the one thinks everything right that is French, the other thinks everything wrong that is not English.

(William Hazlitt, 1832, quoted in YAPP 1983 : 134)

They also stress the interdependence of the two countries: *The day of France's ruin is the eve of the ruin of England.*

(WILSON 1970)

English proverbs about the French are consistent with Berger's (1993) view that ethnic stereotypes involve the feeling of superiority of those who invent and use them towards those who they are stereotyping. This attitude is illustrated in the proverb: *One Englishman can beat three Frenchmen* (WILSON 1970; SPEAKE 2004) and the saying: *The French are pretty hopeless, but France is a geographical necessity* (Sir Anthony Eden, 1953, quoted in YAPP 1983 : 142), which is critical of French people but appreciative of their

country. This observation is very similar to a French proverb about England: *England is a good land, and a bad people* (WILSON 1970).

Some French proverbs referring to English people result from the historical relations between the two countries. Christmas and Fitzclarence (1823 : 774) explain the origins of two early French proverbs concerning the English: *J'ai payé tous mes Anglois* 'I have paid all my English' and *Ore le Pape est derenu François, et Jesu Christ Anglais* 'Now the Pope has become French and Jesus Christ English'. They write:

When a Frenchman would let us understand that he has settled with his creditors, the proverb is *J'ai payé tous mes Anglois* 'I have paid all my English'. This proverb originated when John, the French king, was taken prisoner by our Black Prince. Levies of money were made for the king's ransom, and for many French lords; and the French people have then perpetuated the military glory of our nation, and their own idea of it, by making the English and their creditors synonymous terms. Another relates to the same event – *Ore le Pape est detenu François, et Jesu Christ Anglais* 'Now the Pope is become French and Jesus Christ English'; a proverb which arose when the Pope, exiled from Rome, held his court at Avignon in France; and the English prospered so well, that they possessed more than half the kingdom.

(CHRISTMAS / FITZCLARENCE 1823 : 774)

A few French proverbs and maxims concerning English (and Polish) people are attributed to Napoleon, for example: *Les Anglais ignorent quand ils sont battus* (*The English never know when they are beaten*) (STAWIŃSKA 2004 : 131; WILSON 1970), and *The English are a nation of shop-keepers* (WILSON 1970). The latter expresses a view which is similar to that found in Polish priamels presenting English people as merchants.

The mutual stereotypes of French and Polish people

Nowicki (1995) claims that in French-Polish relations there are few prejudices and negative stereotypes on both sides. Poland and France have never been in a state of war; both are catholic countries, even though attitudes towards religious practices are rather different in the two countries. Nowicki (1995) also notices the fact that Polish expectations towards French people have always been unrealistically high, which resulted in Polish admiration for Napoleon, evidenced in such sayings as:

Bóg jest z Napoleonem. Napoleon z nami! 'God is with Napoleon. Napoleon is with us.'

(MARKIEWICZ / ROMANOWSKI 2005)

Tchórz Napoleonem nie będzie 'A coward will never become Napoleon.'

(KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978)

Udaje Napoleona 'He's pretending to be Napoleon.'

(KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978)

Nie trzeba do tego Napoleona 'We don't need Napoleon to do it.'

(KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978)

Brał i Napoleon czasem po tebinkach 'Even Napoleon lost sometimes.'

(KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978)

Napoleon has also expressed his appraisal of the courage and skills of his Polish soldiers in the battlefield:

Pour mes Polonais rien d'impossible 'For my Polish comrades nothing is impossible.'

(MARKIEWICZ / ROMANOWSKI 2005 : 297)

Laissez le faire aux Polonais! 'Leave it to Poles.'

(MARKIEWICZ / ROMANOWSKI 2005 : 297)

Historically, Poles have been known to French people both as brave soldiers and heavy drinkers, the latter evidenced in the French proverb 'drunk as a Pole' reported by Nowicki (1995 : 168). Thus, Poles were brave in the battlefield, but they were not always disciplined, a tendency which Napoleon summarised in a sentence which in Polish tradition has survived as *Ci ludzie umieją się tylko bić!* 'Those people can only fight' (MARKIEWICZ / ROMANOWSKI 2005). Another saying about Poles which is often attributed to Napoleon is: *Jeden Polak – to czarujący człowiek, dwóch Polaków – to awantura, trzech Polaków – och, to już jest kwestia polska* 'One Pole is a charming man, two Poles – a fight, three Poles – oh, this is already the Polish question' (MARKIEWICZ / ROMANOWSKI 2005 : 298). Voltaire is credited with the saying *La Pologne est le seul royaume qui n'ait point eu l'esprit de conquête* 'Poland is the only country with no conquering spirit' (STAWIŃSKA 2004 : 134).

Polish proverbs and proverbial expressions emphasise the preoccupation of French people with fashion, elegance, delicateness, and comfortable life e.g.:

Delikatny jak francuski piesek 'delicate like a French dog',
Ustrojony jak Francuz 'dressed up like a Frenchman',
Francja – elegancja 'France – elegance',
Żyje jak Pan Bóg we Francji 'He lives like God in France'.

(KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978)

They also reflect Polish admiration for French things, which is what we find in the proverbial quotation from *Pan Tadeusz* by the Polish Romantic writer Adam Mickiewicz: *Bo Paryż częstą mody odmianą się chlubi, aco Francuz wymyśli, to Polak polubi* 'Fashion changes quickly in France, and whatever the Frenchman invents, the Pole will like' (MARKIEWICZ /ROMANOWSKI 2005 : 279), and stress the importance of France in Europe: *Gdy Francja ma katar, cała Europa kicha* 'When France has a running nose, the whole Europe sneezes' (KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978).

Nowicki (1995 : 170) discusses the contrast between the traditional Polish emphasis on honesty in expressing opinions and emotions with the French preference for understatement. This preference of French people has been noted in the Polish proverb: *Po francusku trzymaj język na łańcuszku* 'Say little like the French do' (KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978).

The mutual stereotypes of Polish and English people

The geographical and historical distance between Poland and England has found its reflection in Polish and English stocks of proverbs: English proverb collections consulted here (WILSON 1970; SPEAKE 2004) do not list any proverbs concerning Polish people, and Polish proverb dictionaries only list a few proverbial expressions concerning the English:

Wyjść po angielsku 'to leave the English way',
Delikatny jak angielski piesek 'delicate like an English dog',
Angielska flegma 'English phlegm',
Wygłądać jak angielska śmierć 'to look like the English death'.

(KRZYŻANOWSKI 1969–1978)

They are all rather pejorative and depict English people as phlegmatic, bad-looking and overly delicate. These attributes, combined with the qualities depicted in the Polish priamels quoted above, i.e. ingenious, good at inventing things, England – a country of merchants, suggest that the proverbial Englishman is competent in the professional sphere but not very nice in personal life.

Conclusions

National stereotypes provide insights into relations between countries. They serve as a point of reference in constructing the national identity of a community, and often involve the feeling of superiority of those who invent and use them towards those who they are stereotyping. Stereotypical images of other nations are also closely related with autostereotypes of the nation which creates them.

The history of illustrating national stereotypes in proverbs is quite long: many stereotypes were included in priamels, i.e. proverbial listings of national qualities, which were particularly common in European languages in the 16th and 17th centuries, and have survived in similar forms in many modern languages. Stereotypical attributes of English, French and Polish people seem to be rather consistent throughout Europe: French people are concerned with cooking and love-making, the English are cold in interpersonal relations, while Poles are stupid. French proverbs, in particular those attributed to Napoleon, also stress the courage of Poles in the battlefield, and notice their tendency for excessive drinking. Polish proverbs illustrate the fascination of Poles with foreign countries, e.g. France, and indicate the feeling of inferiority towards other countries, while English proverbs illustrate the feeling of superiority of the English over the French. The mutual image of the French and the English in proverbs seems to be rather negative, but in both languages the importance of the other country is acknowledged. Stereotypical attributes of English, French and Polish people emerging from proverbs are similar to those found in contemporary linguistic jokes and other forms of verbal folklore.

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