



The Mexican sports car controversy: An appraisal analysis of BBC's *Top Gear* and the reproduction of nationalism and racism through humor



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ABSTRACT

One case of derogatory speech that originated from an episode of the BBC television show, *Top Gear*, is examined as a prototypical example of the interplay among national stereotypes, humor, and mass media. The authors use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the global controversy that erupted in response to the single episode in which the show's hosts invoked demeaning stereotypes of Mexico. Martin and White's appraisal framework was applied to a series of texts taken from this global discourse in order to identify the textual means by which humor—in the episode itself as well as the emotionally-charged discourse that emanates from it—serves to reinforce nationalist ideology as the prevailing commonsense. Drawing on multiple fields, this CDA exploration draws a conceptual bridge to the established work on racialized humor in that both benefit from controversial episodes that are played out in mass media because people take the central ideological premise as a given in order to participate in the discourse, thus perpetuating the ideology's central positioning as an unchallenged commonsense. It is worthwhile to study the relationship between nationalized humor and the mass media because it serves as a valuable complement to the existing literature on racialized humor, and it also contributes to broader questions about the role of mass media in reinforcing ideologies.

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1. Introduction

Television, in particular shows aimed at a broad global audience like those of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), can contribute significantly to shaping our worldviews towards other societies and cultures. The commentators of the BBC show *Top Gear*, who use cutting humor to discuss automobiles, are not without their share of controversy. On multiple occasions, their show has sparked discussion of the limits of humor in television broadcasting. Since the show's content is broadcast globally via cable and internet, controversial instances garner global attention and offer academics revealing insights into the relationship shared by mass media, national stereotypes, and humor.

We position one episode as an instructive case-in-point of this relationship. In this particular episode broadcast January 2011, the show's commentators tap into national stereotypes of Mexico in order to carry out a semi-scripted humorous exchange in front of a studio audience. However, controversy erupted in response to the content of the national stereotypes invoked in the exchange. The media in Mexico replayed the segment countless times and

followed the controversy for two weeks. The Mexican senate issued a condemnation of the commentators' remarks. Individuals posted personal reactions online in discussion forums and social networking sites. The BBC issued a public statement in reaction to the growing controversy several weeks following the original broadcast.

Our case study juxtaposes three texts (the original segment, the Mexican media coverage, and the BBC's public statement) to assemble an intertextual series that we analyze through a critical discourse analytic (CDA) lens. We are interested in not only the original text, the genesis of the controversy, but also the strands of discourse it generated across media platforms. We will analyze the interplay of mass media, national stereotypes, and humor as individuals in multiple contexts react to the original text.

1.1. Stereotypes, humor, and mass media

The relationship between stereotypes, humor and mass media is one of delicate balance. Stereotyping is widely recognized as a categorizational process basic to social human functioning (Waters, 2007: 288). That is, without any preconceptions at all, even the simplest social interaction would become overly laborious. Stereotypes can supply shortcuts to punchlines because they invoke shared frames of reference, along with familiar tropes, characters and narratives. Media marketing, for example, capitalizes generously on

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this quality of stereotypes (Widler, 2007). But where there is benefit there is drawback. Stereotypes can also implicitly reinforce skewed perceptions of social groups. For example, existing research demonstrates that mass media exposure can shape individuals' perceptions of social groups, when racialized (Dixon, 2008) and when nationalized (Zhu, unpublished). They draw individuals' focus to the big picture at the expense of the actual diversity on the ground level resulting in a reductionistic view of the global world. This is because, as Lippmann (1965: 59) explains, national stereotypes supply a blind confidence to "define first and then see". Thus, mass media plays an integral role in shaping perceptions and influencing intercultural relations. It becomes a social justice issue when individuals in the media call upon stereotypes in order to justify and naturalize existing systems of marginalization.

Interest in national stereotypes in mass media spans multiple academic disciplines, from communication studies (Zhu, unpublished), management/marketing (Widler, 2007), intercultural communication (Bjerregaard et al., 2005; Ibroscheva and Ramaprasad, 2008; Ladegaard, 2007) to applied linguistics (Bell, 1999; Piller, 2003). National stereotypes are defined as symbolic attributes (e.g., polite, individualistic, arrogant) that are conventionally associated with groups of individuals collectively identified as a nation (e.g., the Canadians, the Americans, the French).

1.2. Discursive theories of nationalism

National stereotypes are extensions of nationalism, which we understand as an ideology of social organization (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995; Calhoun, 1997) that "anchors individuals into nationalist places, narratives, and subjectivities" (Holliday, 2011: 15). While surface manifestations vary widely, at the core is the premise that the fundamental unit of social grouping is the nation (Billig, 1995; Kedourie, 2000). This central premise is often, but not always, accompanied by the argument that every nation requires a political state faithful to its national essence.

The work of Billig (1995) and others represents a discursive turn to the study of nationalism (Özkirimli, 2010: chapter 6; see also Widler, 2007). A discursive theory of nationalism calls for the close examination of mass media discourse because that is where nations are constructed, argued over, justified, and even challenged. This approach utilizes discourse analytic techniques in order to understand the workings of nationalism from the "ground-up" (Brubaker, 2004; Golden, 2001; Fox and Idriss-Miller, 2008; Wodak et al., 2009).

Ideologies, such as nationalism, benefit as their frames of reference, central premise and arguments are passed along through media channels. From existing discourse studies of nationalism (Billig, 1995; Calhoun, 1997; Heller, 2011; Wodak et al., 2009), we are aware of how deeply nationalist ideology pervades our commonsense thinking, making it difficult to imagine a global landscape that is not segmented into nation-states. Elsewhere, Anderson referred to individual's identity and membership as a citizen of nation X as an *imagined community*, whereby the ideology of nationalism creates an illusion of "deep, horizontal comradeship" (2006: 7) and equality amongst its members. We use the term *nationalist commonsense* to refer to this condition.

Racially demeaning humor in mass media already has an established place in the interdisciplinary literature, so what is needed is a parallel examination of nationalized humor. We use this case study to establish a conceptual bridge between racialized and nationalized humor, thus enriching our general understanding of controversial humor in mass media. Specifically, we demonstrate how similar discursive processes are at hand in controversial incidents of racialized and nationalized humor. In short, such events draw upon pejorative stereotypes and in turn initiate strings of reactive discourse that distract individuals from the core pejorative content inscribed in the original text. This discursive

cycle ultimately serves to reinforce prevailing hierarchies of power defined according to racialized or nationalized ideologies.

2. Method

We approach this study through a CDA framework. Consistent with CDA scholarship, we aim to shed light on the workings of power in social discourse through the means of empirical textual analysis. Equally consistent with CDA tradition, we utilize an eclectic set of theoretical and analytical tools in constructing our textual examination (van Dijk, 2001a, 2001b). At the theoretical level, we are informed by key constructs such as mediatization (Agha, 2011; Cole and Pellicer, 2012), ideology (Gal and Irvine, 1995; Silverstein, 1979; van Dijk, 1998; Voloshinov, 1986), and essentialism (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004), all concepts developed within the areas of CDA and linguistic anthropology. In terms of methodological tools, we call upon the linguistic resources offered by the appraisal framework (Martin and White, 2005) to account for the relationship between text and relevant theoretical constructs.

The appraisal framework developed as an extension of systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) and offers a means for discerning systems of interpersonal relations between social actors (Derewianka, 2009; Martin, 2004; Martin and White, 2005). The appraisal framework offers three domains of interpersonal meaning that can be realized in textual artifacts: *attitude*, *graduation*, and *engagement*. Central to the framework is the domain of attitude which divides along three branches: affect (feelings/emotions), appreciation (evaluation of things), judgement (evaluation of behavior). Martin and White (2005: 45) characterize appreciation/judgement as "institutionalized feelings" that make up "shared community values" as opposed to the deeply intrapersonal expressive resource of affect.

Where attitude is a central evaluative process, graduation and engagement are understood in the appraisal framework as discursive resources that serve to "scale intensity or degree" of attitude, in the case of graduation, and to "adopt a position with respect to propositions" in the case of engagement (Martin and White, 2005: 39–40). Graduation devices elevate/reduce the force of evaluative work as well as through quantification (Derewianka, 2009: 144). Engagement resources help social actors realize interpersonal stance in text both in relation to one another and to the propositions at hand. The utility of the appraisal framework is demonstrated in its ongoing application to examinations of evaluative work in media discourse (Baker and Potts, 2013; Chandrasegaran, 2013; Oddo, 2013; Pounds, 2012; Swain, 2012; White 2012).

We integrate these theoretical and analytical tools into a single framework appropriate to an examination of nationalized discourse in mass media. Our analysis gives attention to three inter-related texts that originate with a controversial exchange on a BBC television episode. Our interest begins with the television episode but extends in equal parts to the strand of discourse generated as the controversial remarks are recontextualized multiple times across contexts. Our aim is three-fold: (1) provide an account of how textual choices construe evaluation in the original controversial text and the subsequent discourse as individuals react to the controversial comments, (2) pinpoint how the interplay of humor and nationalism across the intertextual series serves to perpetuate a nationalist commonsense, and (3) highlight how national and racial humor operate through the same form of essentialism at a more fundamental level.

3. Text one: the excerpt at the center of controversy

Jeremy Clarkson and the *Top Gear* program are controversial in Britain for their "non-politically correct" humor and public

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