

English-language swearing as humor in Swedish comic strips

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the Swedish, non-native use of English swear words in Swedish-language comic strips. I first consider the established relationships between both swearing and humor, and comics and humor. I propose that swear word usage and the comic strip framework contribute to a mutual feedback loop, whereby the comic strip derives its humor from the use of English swear words, while at the same time the comic strip context, by invoking a play frame, primes the swear word usage for humorous interpretation. Modeling Siegel (1995), I then consider how a code-switch to English serves as a framing device or contextualization cue for humor in Swedish-language contexts. The analysis of a selection of Swedish comic strips draws from the Encryption Theory of Humor (Flamson and Barrett, 2008), and suggests that humor created via the Swedish practice of swearing in English is a function of shared background knowledge that capitalizes on the fundamental incongruity of two discourse systems operating under different norms of appropriateness. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The English language can be said to have entered the Swedish speech community from two directions: from above, via a process of institutionalization as a result of language planning policy, and from below, most noticeably through the global spread of English-language popular culture (Preisler, 1999). The result of these combined forces is that nearly everyone in Swedish society can be assumed to come into sporadic if not regular contact with English, in the form of learning, actively using, or simply being exposed to English. Thus, similar linguistic experiences collectively constitute a common, society-wide background knowledge, which can be exploited for various communicative goals. In this article, I propose that both knowledge of English and familiarity with Anglophone cultures are included in general Swedish background knowledge. I further propose that it is this shared background knowledge that, in turn, allows Swedish people to capitalize on English as a linguistic resource for pragmatic purposes, one of which is to convey humor. The general aim of this article is to explore the humorous aspect of the use of English swearwords, focusing on the context of contemporary Swedish newspaper comic strips as a key to both constructing and reinforcing this pragmatic function.

Assuming Apte's (1985:190) claim that a variety of a foreign or second language may be "considered appropriate for humor" in certain speech communities, I provide evidence of English being used as a language of play in Sweden. I focus on the specific example of the recurring use of English swearwords in Swedish comic strips, arguing that while the comic

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strip context indeed frames the use of English as humorous, humor is also a function of shared background knowledge according to the Encryption Model of Humor (Flamson and Barrett, 2008). Humor is furthermore due to intercultural contrasts in the form of interdiscourse humor (Norrick, 2007) with regards to the position of English as a foreign language in Swedish society and the native-speaker taboos associated with English swearwords.

The use of English swear words is not unique to the Swedish context; *fuck* in particular, and to a lesser extent *shit*, have entered the lexicons of, for example, Norwegian (Andersen, 2014), Danish (Rathje, 2011), Finnish (Hjort, 2017), Dutch (Zenner et al., 2017), and French (Jaffe, 2017), in both their native forms and in language-specific orthographic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic adaptations. To date, however, there is no research focusing on the use of English swear words specifically as sources of humor in other languages, especially in comic strips. An additional aim of this study is thus to initiate research on the humorous functions of English-language swearing.

In the next section, I review the relationship between comics and humor, before exploring the relationship between swearing and humor. I then present the status of English in Sweden, establishing its nationwide prominence as conducive to the practices of code-switching and borrowing. Finally, I present an analysis of examples of the use of English swearwords in Swedish newspaper comic strips, discussing the linguistic and pragmatic role in conveying humor.

2. Comics and humor

In order to understand the role of Swedish comic strips in both constructing and reinforcing the humorous use of English swear words, the connection between comic strips and humor must be made evident. Beginning with basic nomenclature, the term ‘comic strip’ is used to refer to one object within the medium of ‘comics’ (McCloud, 1993:4), which is defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). The comics featured in this study adhere to this definition.

Historically, the very first comic strips appeared in periodicals, magazines, and newspapers (Gardner, 2012), and were, in fact, comical, hence the emergence of the terms ‘comic strips’ and ‘comics’, but also alternatives such as, ‘cartoon strips’, ‘the funny pages’, or simply ‘the funnies’. Contemporary comics scholars are, however, quick to refute any inherent humor in comics (Gardner, 2012; McCloud, 1993; Saraceni, 2003), citing plenty of examples of serious, tragic, superhero or sci-fi comics deliberately devoid of humor. The modern development away from the traditional comics-as-humor template is reflected in the use of terms such as ‘graphic novel’ or ‘graphic narrative’, in effect allowing the established connection between humor and the objects referred to as ‘comics’ and ‘comic strips’ to persist, particularly with regards to newspaper comic strips, i.e., ‘the funnies’ (Inge, 1990).

For this reason, at least one of Freud’s accompanying factors for humor can be applied to (newspaper) comic strips, namely, that they create an “expectation of the comic”, whereby readers are “attuned to comic pleasure” (Freud, 1905:282–285, as cited in Raskin, 1985/2012:12). In other words, regardless of whether a newspaper comic strip is meant to be (or reliably succeeds in being) funny, a reader can be assumed to approach it with an expectation of humor and/or will consider the conditions of the comic strip context as favorable for humor. This applies especially to each of the contemporary Swedish comic strips featured in this article, which make overt attempts at being humorous by adhering to the traditional comic strip format. In other words, the comics are either single-panel comics (that is, panel gags or gag-a-day comics) or multi-panel comics structured around an incongruity or opposition serving as the source of humor (Beers Fägersten, 2014b:156). This is to say that humor results when a textual or visual cue encourages a likely interpretation of a narrative or a contextualized image, which is then challenged by new information that opposes the likely interpretation, rendering it incongruent. This incongruity results in “cognitive dissonance” (Yus, 2003:1308), which can only be resolved with an alternative, humorous interpretation: “The resolution of the incongruity, by finding an overall coherent sense of the whole text, together with the addressee’s realization of having been fooled into selecting a specific interpretation, is supposed to trigger a humorous effect” (Yus, 2003:1309). Incongruity is particularly essential to the humor of comic strips, the multimodality of which allows for three possible kinds of opposition: within the texts, within the images, or between the text(s) and image(s) (Beers Fägersten, 2014b:156). As shown in the examples presented later, both text and image are used as resources in the processing and reading of comics (Cohn, 2013, McCloud, 1993), to formulate both likely (or ‘relevant’, to use Sperber and Wilson’s (1986/1995) and Yus’s (2003) terminology) and alternative interpretations.

2.1. Swearing and humor

While the use of swearwords is conventionally associated with abuse, aggression, hostility, pain, frustration, or similar negative emotions and experiences, there is also evidence that swearing indexes interlocutor intimacy, expressions of solidarity, or well-being in the communicative context (see Beers Fägersten, 2012a for a review of research). The apparent polarity between the two general functions of swearing is reflected in the terms “annoyance swearing” and “social swearing” (Montagu, 2001), each triggered by generally negative or generally positive, respectively, circumstances or contexts. While different sociolinguistic and pragmatic variables can prompt swearword usage or

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