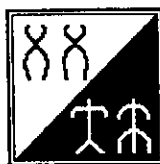

SIMPLE FORMS

An Encyclopaedia of Simple Text-Types in Lore and Literature

edited
by

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Blason populaire

BLASON POPULAIRE

1. Definition: *Blason populaire* (b.p.) is a rarely used, though internationally accepted technical term for ethnic or cultural verbal stereotypes which are commonly known to the members of a particular ethnic or cultural group. The name goes back to the French word *blason*, which means as much as 'crest', and which, in this context, is supposed to express the idea that certain constant characteristics are attributed to a particular ethnic or cultural group. There seems to exist no convenient, generally accepted English term (Taylor 1931: 99, Palmore 1962). Attempts to introduce the neologism 'ethnophaulism', which is derived from the Greek words *ethnos* (i.e. 'some national group') and *phauliso* (i.e. 'to disparage'), have been accepted only partially (cf. Roback 1944: 251). In colloquial English, the term 'ethnic slur' might come closest to the phenomenon in scholarly discourse.

2./3./5. Examples and Analysis / Typology / Related Forms and Transformations: A generally accepted typology of b.p.s does not exist; probably, this is due to the fact that there is no clear-cut genre distinction. B.p.s can take various shapes: a b.p. may have the form of a single word, of a phraseological collocation, a *proverb, a *riddle or a *joke as well as that of an *anecdote or a short narrative; many other forms can be found, and they may freely be converted into each other. This lack of genre distinction is the reason for two important phenomena.

Firstly, there have been hardly any systematic studies into b.p.s. It seems reasonable, therefore, to initially analyze b.p.s strictly with regard to each of the various types as which they may occur, and only then, in a second step, proceed from these separate analyses to a contrastive and more comprehensive study.

Secondly, the essence of a b.p. seems to be rather a *functional* than a generic one, as Dundes (1975: 23) convincingly states. According to him, the dominant function of a b.p. consists in making fun of either oneself (of one's own group, i.e. the in-group) or of others (of others' groups, i.e. the out-group). The essential characteristic of a b.p., however, should not be confined to a merely amusing function. Rather, one of its major functions seems to be that of ethnic or cultural self-definition, a process which includes the distinction of oneself (one's own group) from others (the others' group or groups) (cf. Widdowson 1981); in this process, one usually has to take into account distinctly aggressive and anti-social factors, too. This derogatory function can be observed on practically all levels of verbalization.

Typical single-word b.p.s are names, or rather nicknames, for the

members of another ethnic or cultural group, e.g. of a different nation, usually some neighbouring nation; on this level, the function of b.p.s is similar to individual nicknaming. Still, neither the target of the b.p. nor the person employing the b.p. actually are understood as individuals; rather both addresser and addressee of the b.p. either regard themselves or are regarded to be a member of a particular ethnic or cultural group.

Dutch may be called (1) 'cheese-heads' by Germans, for example, and French may be called (2a) 'frog-eaters' or simply (2b) 'froggies' by the English. Ex. (2) seems to be one of the few b.p.s which originate in a culinary delicacy, namely the French taste for frog legs, a custom which the English thought to be bizarre and loathsome (Allen 1983). Reference to alien ethnic food in general is quite common in b.p.s of this kind, however. Thus, Germans have traditionally been called (3a) 'sauerkrauts' or simply (3b) 'krauts' in English; Mexicans may be called (4a) 'bean-eaters', or (4b) 'chili-eaters', or simply (4c) 'chilianos' by Americans, in particular by Californians. There may even be completely metonymically used names such as (5) 'goulash' for Hungarians, or (6a) 'maccaroni' or (6b) 'spaghetti' for Italians. In the latter case, one can even observe verbal transformations such as (6c) 'spiggotty', which emphasize the overall mocking tendency. On the whole, b.p.s based on dietary stereotypes represent only a part of the possible spectrum. Still, according to Palmore (1962: 443), such names are quite typical insofar as they express stereotypes of highly *visible* cultural differences. In this case the names of visible things, which are regarded as highly culture-specific, are transferred to the members of the culture in question. Taylor (1931: 98) seems to be correct, therefore, in stating that physical peculiarities of the members of the out-group themselves are rarely commented on. This is only true, however, as long as the out-group is of the same general racial type as the in-group in question; when the out-group is from a different race, b.p.s often express stereotyped physical differences. Thus, an Indian may be called (5) 'redskin' by a White, who may in turn be called (6) 'paleface' by the Indian.

The observed derogatory tendency (either implicit or explicit) may be more direct, one of the strongest ways of expressing contempt toward neighbouring peoples perhaps being the identification with the devil (cf. Oinas 1970). In such examples, however, we don't find any specific stereotypization. Therefore, not every cultural nickname is generally regarded to be a b.p., but only those which contain a stereotyped characterization; the essence of a b.p. would thus be a process of predication (Quasthoff 1973). More often than not, however, initial predications in names are not being noticed as such in later times, so that it is difficult to make clear-cut distinctions.

B.p.s may also take the shape of a phraseological collocation; perhaps, the relativity of ethnic stereotypes can best be demonstrated on this level. - The venereal disease termed syphilis is a good example for demonstration, since it was unknown to European countries before Columbus came back from America in 1492; consequently, no names existed for this illness before the late 15th century and people had to figure out names for it. Thus, it was called 'French disease' by the English, Swedish (*franska sjuken*), Hungarians (*francia nyvalia*), or Russians *frantsuzskaya bolezn'*. Yet, the French are by no means the only ones to be considered the original 'donors'; they themselves refer to it as 'Florentine evil' (*mal florentin*), Portuguese might call it the 'Naples evil' *malde Napoles*, Germans and Dutch, among others, referred to it as the 'Spanish illness' (*spanische Krankheit*) or 'Spanish pocks' (*spaanische pokken*), respectively, and in British slang one can find the name 'Irish button'. Thus, at first glance, the culture chosen for stereotype seems to be rather arbitrarily selected. Yet, this must not be understood in the sense of general arbitrariness in the motivation of the accompanying b.p.s. Two different means of projection are used here: either the assumed (but not necessarily authentic!) origin of the illness is referred to, or the immediate neighbouring people is made responsible for having transmitted it. In this case, the direct contact with the respective out-group is the motive for the b.p.. The old Japanese name for syphilis, *too-kasa*, illustrates best the basic cultural process underlying all these phenomena: *Too* ('foreign') and *kasa* ('ulcer') were combined in a phraseological expression to connote the 'foreign illness'. Thus, in this example we see very clearly, how the notions of 'foreign' vs. 'familiar' and distinction between 'them' and 'ourselves' lie at the very basis of cultural processes of (self-)definition in general, and of b.p.s in particular (Grzybek 1990).

This is the reason why we find many b.p.s concerning, for instance, Mexicans in California. Here, dysentery may be called (7a) 'Mexican fox-trot', (7b) 'Mexican two-step', or (7c) 'Mexican toothache'; a hose and siphon used at night to steal gasoline from parking cars are called (8a) 'Mexican credit card' or (8b) 'Mexican filling station'. In this case, 'Mexican' as modifier is most probable to drop out of currency where Mexicans are not found, the term being replaced by some other regional or ethnic name (cf. Cray 1962).

B.p.s need not necessarily be employed on an ethnic or national level; they may also be directed against smaller out-groups such as particular regions, cities, or small villages. Any group subject to stereotyping may be broken down to smaller groups with more specific characteristics; Jews, for example, international prototypes for the projection of cultural stereotypes (cf. Jellinck 1882-86), may be further distinguished into

Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews. Therefore, it seems quite reasonable that b.p.s have often been explained by the human "desire for teasing and necking" (Schulte 1905: 142), which is expressed with regard to various types (and sizes) of out-groups. In this sense, the statistically proven "close connection with ethnocentrism and prejudice" (Palmore 1962: 442) might ultimately be traced back to the psychological or anthropological concept of egocentrism, and to the need of an individual to define one's self (the ego) by distinguishing and distancing from other persons, usually from the closest surroundings. However, on this level one would not speak of b.p.s, which, per definitionem, are commonly known and used within a whole ethnic or cultural group. Still, the psychological, or rather ethno-psychological basis of this process might possibly explain the almost universal distribution of the b.p. in its various verbal manifestations. Cultural groups do not only create hetero-models, i.e. stereotypes of other groups, but also auto-models, i.e. stereotypes of one's own group (and even stereotypes about the assumed stereotypes of others). This can be seen more clearly on the level of more complex texts, i.e. in texts on the sentence level and beyond. This is one reason why *proverbs and related genres are very likely to function as b.p.s, since they represent minimal folkloristic *models*, which usually are held to be authentic and authoritative utterances, and which, in this respect, are perfectly apt for the transmission of stereotypes. If one compares three relevant proverbial sayings, such as a Polish (9a), a Russian (9b), and a Levantine (9c), one obtains three different listings and orderings:

- (9a) The Pole is deceived by the German, the German by the Italian, the Italian by the Spaniard, the Spaniard by the Jew, the Jew by the devil.
- (9b) A Russian can be cheated only by a Gypsy; a Gypsy by a Jew; a Jew by a Greek, and a Greek by the devil.
- (9c) It takes three Jews to cheat a Greek, three Greeks to cheat a Syrian, and three Syrians to cheat an Armenian.

Interestingly enough, these examples are not actually based on true comparisons of traits, but rather imply mechanisms of mere gradation, i.e. comparisons of degree. Still, the nations mentioned in the climax do not seem to be chosen by chance. It becomes obvious that, on the one hand, this kind of gradation and exaggeration is a typical device of humour in general, and of *jokes and joke-like *anecdotes in particular. On the other hand, b.p.s represented by these genres may also show a more overt stereotypization, making use of this device as a means of conveying stereotypes rather than representing it as a self-contained means in which the nationalities are semantically void slot-fillers. The

close connection between ethnic stereotyping in b.p.s and joking (Zenner 1979) can clearly be seen in the following joke-like *anecdote which, quite characteristically for b.p.s of this kind, makes use of two devices. Firstly, it introduces individual representatives of the respective nation, and secondly, the action takes place on a desert island and thus employs isolation and concentration for the emphasis of specific traits:

- (10) There was a shipwreck on an island. The survivors were an American, an Englishman, a Frenchman and a German. After about six months, the German had organized the natives into an army, the Frenchman had built a brothel, the American had built a factory using native labour, and the Englishman was sitting on the beach waiting to be introduced.

Of course, this example clearly demonstrates cultural stereotypes, such as the assumed German militaristic orientation or the British stand-offishness. Most likely, this anecdote would be considered only half as funny, were the English behaviour mentioned in the first place. Thus, cultural stereotypes and specific functions of humour, in particular anti-social and aggressive function, are closely interrelated here. The same can be said about *riddles, which have much in common with aggressive humour and jokes in general:

- (11) Why do the Americans have the Negroes and the Belgians the Flemish? - Because the Americans had first choice.

This example shows that the essence of the b.p. definitely goes beyond just 'making fun' of someone else or of a different ethnic or cultural group. In a way, one can understand why the documentation and the investigation of b.p.s have even been forbidden, e.g. in many East European states. Of course, this prohibition does in no way mean that in these countries b.p.s are not current among the folk, and it seems questionable if such prohibitions actually can help to overcome discrimination. It might be more reasonable and successful to create as much consciousness of the mechanisms of discrimination involved as possible, for example by transformations of b.p.s on a meta-level, such as the following one which is current in contemporary Germany, and which mocks anti-foreign sayings:

- (12) Everyone is a foreigner - almost everywhere.

If, however, ethnic stereotyping actually turns out to be a constituent process of culture (in its broadest sense), it seems questionable if one will

ever overcome its negative (aggressive) accompaniments.- The close interrelation of ethnic and cultural stereotypes with the aggressive sides of humour makes b.p.s a fundamental part of children's folklore, of which many of the above-mentioned types of b.p.s are quite characteristic. So b.p.s may often be found in usually 'harmless' genres such as children's rhymes or even *nursery rhymes. In this way, children are made acquainted with ethnic and cultural prejudices before they have ever met a single representative of the stereotyped group. In this case, children acquire and transmit cultural stereotypes, before they can even understand them.

4.16.17. History / Geography / History of Interpretation:

Although b.p.s tend to show a universal distribution, and although they seem to be part of a long history because of their anthropological foundation, b.p.s have been consciously collected and investigated only from the 19th century onwards. Additionally, attention has been paid to them only in a few places all over the world. Most probably, the rise of interest was then motivated by nationalist and anti-nationalist tendencies of that time.

One of the earliest studies was undertaken in Germany by Wackernagel, who, in 1848, paid attention to the b.p. in his short essay "Die Spottnamen der Völker". Until the second half of our century, the study of the b.p. has been mostly restricted to collecting them. In this respect, the first major work was Reinsberg-Düringfeld's (1863) collection *Internationale Titulaturen*. This collection makes the important distinction between auto- and hetero-stereotypes: its first volume contains sayings 'peoples say about one another', the second one concerns examples of what 'peoples say about themselves'. Important French collections which are considered to be responsible for the distribution of the term *blason populaire*, are those by Canel (1859) and by Gaidoz/Sébillot (1884). Important folkloristic contributions from earlier decades of our century are Taylor's (1931: 97ff.) chapter on the b.p. in his seminal study on *The Proverb* and Roback's (1944) *Dictionary of International Slurs*.

In subsequent years, important research has been undertaken in sociology and social psychology, mainly on the basis of Lippmann's (1922) most influential definition of 'stereotype'. In these studies, motivational aspects of stereotypization have been focused, whereas the investigation both of the actual verbal forms of stereotypes and of their cultural functions have been largely neglected (Cauthen *et al.* 1971). Only in the most recent past, linguistics, folkloristics and semiotics are increasingly taking notice of the important cultural dimensions of this phenomenon and of the verbal forms involved (Dundes 1971, 1975;

Allen 1983; Grzybek 1990).

8. Collections: CANEL 1859; GAIDOZ-SÉBILLOT 1884; JELLINEK 1882-86; REINSBERG-DÜRINGFELD 1863; ROBACK 1944.

9. Bibliography: ALLEN 1983; CRAY 1962; DUNDES 1971, 1975; GRZYBEK 1989, 1990; LIPPMANN 1922; OINAS 1970; PALMORE 1962; QUASTHOFF 1973; SCHULTE 1905; TAYLOR 1931; WACKERNAGEL 1848; WIDDOWSON 1981; ZENNER 1979.