

Federica Visani

«An American, a French and a Russian meet on a desert island...».  
The representation of the foreigner and the cultural transfer  
in Russian contemporary jokes.

*Introduction*

With the progressive unification of Europe's political space, the determination of the cultural identity through the juxtaposition of cultures is a central and semiotically innovative subject.

The contact between different cultures provokes a weakening in the specificity of each of them. This weakening is directed to a standardization converging to a dominant common model. However, the acculturation and consequent progressive loss of the identity is also stimulus for giving rise to some forms of reaction to preserve the own cultural specificity.

In urban oral culture a response to the establishment of intercultural relations within a society can be found in the "jokes about foreigners". These jokes generally spread out in industrial societies, characterized by important migrations from the periphery to the centre and by the inevitable collision between different social and ethnic groups. In fact, they can be classified as ethnic humour, which is defined by M. Apte «(...) as a type of humour in which fun is made of the perceived behaviour, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific socio-cultural identity» (Apte 1985: 108). Ethnic humour is «[...] presumed to have the function of intra-group social control when it directly or indirectly expresses approval of a group's socio-cultural characteristics, encourages strong ethnic identity and positive self-image for group members, and disapproves by ridicule individuals who do not confirm to existing cultural norms [...]» (Apte 1985: 133). Making fun of individuals from other cultural groups, they aim at the maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity in a situation of intercultural interaction.

Referring to Russian culture, ethnic jokes have long been part of Russian folklore, being Russia one of the world's most ethnically heterogeneous nations, in terms of both number and diversity of ethnic groups living in its territory. However, inside the general category of contemporary Russian ethnic humour it is necessary to trace out a subdivision between ethnic jokes, in their strict and classic sense of definition, and jokes that we can call cross-cultural, which actually seem, at a first sight, to be ethnic jousts. This subdivision develops under the influence of some factors concerning the socio-cultural Soviet context and the consequences they had on Russian present society.

The Soviet Empire was rather a multiethnic entity than a simple union of different sovereign states. The strong mobility of its populations, the imposition of the language, culture and habits of the Russian dominant ethnic group created a melting pot of different nationalities which didn't really perceive each other as foreigners. In the repertory of contemporary Russian ethnic joke-lore are prominent jokes about Georgians, Ukrainians, Chukchis and Jews, those ethnic minorities living in the territory of the Russian Federation and having a direct contact with its population. As to Emil Draitser, «[...] to tell a joke about a certain nationality means to show awareness of its existence, of its distinctive character. Telling jokes about a group reveals at least a passing familiarity with its everyday life» (Draitser 1998:17). Telling jokes in which an ethnicity is portrayed as ignorant or inept serves to Russians as a self-therapy, reassuring them about their status of superiority.

Cross-cultural jokes, on the other side, though being part of ethnic humour, differ from the mentioned ethnic jokes. First of all they talk about “real” foreigners, those nationalities Russians have usually no contact with. These jokes are not based on a direct knowledge of foreigners, but on the representations of them provided by Russian culture and related to more general stereotypes, present in many European cultures. Secondly, even disclosing Russian myths about foreigners, the targeted ethnic group are Russians. Cross-cultural jokes use the juxtaposition of cultural identities, belonging to different spheres, to transmit representations of two cultural identities, the Russian and the foreign one. If the semantic of the foreigner corresponds entirely to his representation in Russian culture, the identity of the Russian is completely rebuilt like opposite to the official model.

In this article the semiotic functioning of cross-cultural jokes will be discussed. After a brief introduction drawing up the origins and the main features of this cycle, an attempt will be made to explain how these jokes work in conformity with the semiotic mechanism of the “border” to define the cultural identities of Russians and foreigners. I will also talk about the stereotypes as the new information resulting from the cultural transfer from one semiotic system to another. Finally I will describe the concrete representations of foreigners and Russians produced by this cycle of jokes.

### 1. *Cross-cultural jokes*<sup>1</sup>

Cross-cultural jokes have quite ancient roots in Russian culture. As Efim Kurganov (2001: 24-26) affirms, they originate in the comic tales about foolish neighbours and the land, the city, the village of stupid people, which in Russia began to be published in the XVIII century. In these tales «[...] вышучиваются непонятли-

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<sup>1</sup> For the research project this paper is based on, I analysed Russian jokes circulating during the seventies. Even if belonging to Soviet culture and reflecting some particularities of Soviet everyday life these texts continue to be told at the present time. Because of using universal archetypal models they can easily adapt to different cultures and times.

вость, наивность, иногда даже просто тупость ‘деревенщины’»<sup>2</sup> (Kurganov 2001, 24-26).

As their predecessors, cross-cultural jokes follow the archaic archetypal model of stupidity-intelligence. In these texts many ethnic groups are simultaneously targeted. Individuals from different cultures face a common situation and respond to it according to those features that have been ascribed to their cultural identity by the culture in which the joke is told. The situation is always standardized and corresponds to the model of the competition. Joke’s heroes, prisoners of the cannibals on a remote island or having to prove their bravery, are required to find a clever solution for a situation apparently without escaping way, or to perform an extremely risky task in order to demonstrate their mental and physical skills. Just one of the competitors, in most of the cases the member of the culture in which the joke is told, is the winner. The reasons determining the elaboration of such texts and their functions, in the past as well as in the contemporary Russian culture, are evident. Ever since the past centuries, when every village was perceived by its inhabitants as a closed microcosm existing as autonomous from the other villages, the derision of the inhabitants from the neighbourhood was the consequence of the mixing of cultural identities and of the fear of a possible loss of the own culture’s specificity. In a more contemporary context of “ethnic proximity”, such as an industrial multiethnic society, the ruling ethnic group, or the dominant social class affirms its identity and defends its position of superiority through the derision of the “others”. In this way the storyteller stands out from the foreigner, the “other”, who he defines as a foolish, automatically reserving him a position of cultural inadequacy and subordination. The definition of the identity of the “other” entails, through a process of juxtaposition, the establishment of the own culture’s specificity, which stands out for being the opposite of the “other” culture.

This mechanism works in the cultural periphery of a society where the integrity of the dominant culture begins to crack under the pressure of the proximity of the “other” cultures. In this case the lack of clearness and the consequent permeability of the border separating different semiotic spheres allow the penetration of the foreign text in the own culture.

## *2. The border and the cultural transfer*

Ju.M. Lotman<sup>3</sup> calls the space of every culture “semiosphere”, i.e. a semiotic continuum, where all the communication processes and the elaboration of the new information are performed. The main features of the semiosphere, individuality and homogeneity, lead to its differentiation on the one hand from the extra-semiotic space, i.e. from nature, on the other from the “other-semiotic” environment, i.e. from the sphere of foreign cultures. According to Lotman, «Замкнутость’ семносферы

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<sup>2</sup> «[...] it is made fun of the obtuseness, naivety, sometimes narrow-mindedness of the “villageous people”».

<sup>3</sup> For the theory of the semiosphere and the border see Lotman 1984.

проявляется в том, что она не может соприкасаться с иносемiotическими текстами или с нетекстами. Для того чтобы они для нее получили реальность, ей необходимо перевести их на один из языков ее внутреннего пространства или семиотизировать факты.»<sup>4</sup> (Lotman 1984).

The rigid separation between one semiosphere and the environment, perceived as other, different or foreign, leads to the main concept of border. As formulated by Ju.M. Lotman, the border is one of the basic mechanisms regulating the definition of the semiotic individuality. It can be easily applied to the analysis of different phenomena concerning the designation of the cultural identity. The perception that every group has of itself leads to the activation of a criterion of juxtaposition to the other ethnic groups. The knowledge of the “other”, not belonging to our ethno-cultural, social, linguistic, behavioural spheres, is the means used to demarcate the sphere of the “own”.

Cross-cultural jokes work in conformity with the semiotic mechanism of the border. These texts are displaced in the peripheral space where the contact, among different foreign cultural texts and their consequent transfer into Russian culture, takes place. The border is a kind of bidirectional translating filter, allowing the translation of the foreign cultural text into the internal language of the semiosphere. Transferring the foreign text into Russian culture jokes transforms it in a text about the foreigner. For example:

1. Поспорили русские, англичане и французы, кто дольше в холодильнике просидит. Англичане взяли с собой карты, виски и залезли. Просидели день - не выдержали и вылезли. Французы взяли вино и баб. Просидели два дня и тоже вылезли. Русские взяли самогон и закуску. Неделю сидят, вторую. Думают, замерзли они там, надо посмотреть. Открывает человек дверь, а ему пинок по морде и дверь снова закрывается. Голос из рефрижератора:  
- Ваня, за что ты его?  
- Ну Петя, тут и так холодно, а он еще дверь открывает!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> «The semiosphere shows its character of introversion and closure through its impossibility to come into contact with the “other-semiotic” texts or the “extra-semiotic” ones. To make them meaningful the semiosphere needs to translate them into one of its semiotic languages».

<sup>5</sup> Russians, English and French have a discussion about who of them can stay longer in a refrigerator. English take cards, a bottle of whiskey and get in. After one day spent there they cannot stand the cold anymore and go out. French take women and a bottle of wine. After two days spent there they cannot stand the cold anymore and go out. Russians take litres of vodka and some appetizers. After two weeks passed in the refrigerator people outside begin to get worried and decide to have a look inside. Somebody opens the door, he’s suddenly punched on the nose and the door closes again. A voice from inside the refrigerator:

- Vanja, why did you punch him???

- Don’t you understand, Petja? Here it’s so cold and this idiot is opening the door!

The situation represented in the joke is a stereotyped competition between three individuals, two of them are foreigners, the third is a Russian, the member of the culture in which the joke is told. They all are required to demonstrate their bravery and physical force by getting through a concrete proof. Each of them has to choose his behavioural model: how to react to the proposed situation? In turn English, French, and last Russians act. Through his actions every character communicates some information about his own culture: English like playing cards and drinking whiskey, French prefer women and wine, Russians vodka and appetizers. The cultural individuality of each character is clearly expressed by material symbols typical for the respective cultures.

The joke reproduces a certain fragment of the Russian world's naïve picture. Transferring from the own culture into the Russian joke the semantic of the foreign text is filtrated and radically simplified. The model of the foreigner reduces to those features that are considered semiotically significant in the determination of his national identity and correspond to the mental representations existing in Russian culture about him. In this way the foreign cultural texts pass through a process of semiotic transformation becoming the information comprehensible for the members of the receiving culture. In this sense the border and the joke as a border can be considered as the sphere in which takes place the formation of meaning and new information. The cultural translation as a transfer from the external semiotic system of the foreign culture to the joke's internal one generates new information present as stereotypes.

### *3. Stereotypes*

The stereotype in jokes is the result of the filtration of the model of the foreigner and its consequent adaptation to the receiving culture. It is the mental projection of a certain fragment of reality, whose presence in jokes is motivated by the same Russian culture.

Stereotypes, present in jokes, are related to ethno-geographic representations, rather than just to the ethnic ones, as it happens for example in jokes about ethnic minorities. National-geographic stereotypes are the content of Russian world naïve mythology describing the properties and the particularities of the different nations. They are reflected in the linguistic functioning of a certain semantic group composed by an adjective, indicating the nationality and a substantive, expressing a specific psychological or physical feature significant for that nationality. Plungian and Rachilina affirm: «[...] лингвистически релевантными являются названия далеко не всех народов, окружающих русских: лингвистически отмеченные сочетания возможны прежде всего со словами *русский, французский, немецкий*, а также *восточный* и *южный* [...]. Кроме того небольшое число лингвистически отмеченных сочетаний (впрочем, достаточно бесспорных) засвидетельствовано для слов

*английский, американский [...]*<sup>6</sup> (Plungjan, Rachilina 1996: 342). These idioms seem to be the linguistic structure of the stereotypes existing in Russian culture. The fact that in jokes as in language a central position is occupied by the stereotypes concerning the same nationalities is an evident demonstration of the specificity of a certain fragment of the world associated with these nationalities. Moreover, it confirms also the centrality and stability of some foreign texts in Russian culture.

The most frequent types of foreigners, appearing in jokes, are the French, the American or the English, sometimes the German. Stereotypes forming the semantic of these models are minimised representations, some invariants corresponding entirely to the semantic of the mentioned idioms in Russian language, i.e. jokes elaborate stereotypes already existing in Russian culture:

2. Американец, француз и русский поспорили - кто всех храбрее?

- Мы, американцы, по жребию разыгрываем десять машин, причем у одной из них нет тормозов, и мчимся по горной дороге... Потом один лежит в больнице, а остальные девять его навещают.

- А мы у себя во Франции собираемся вдесятером, разыгрываем десять девушек, причем у одной из них сифилис... Потом один ложится в больницу, а остальные девять его навещают.

- А у нас в России еще хлеще: рассказываем в компании политические анекдоты, причем все знаем, что один из нас стукач.

- А потом?

- А потом девять сидят, а один носит им передачи<sup>7</sup>.

The representation of the American outlined in this joke corresponds to a pragmatic, practical and successful person, whose qualities are confirmed by the presence of the car. The car is a significant trait in the semantic of the stereotype of the American. Aleksandr Genis in *Amerikanskaja azbuka* (The American spelling book) writes about American culture, that «Автомобиль – это и сосредоточие американ-

<sup>6</sup> «Not all the denominations of the nations experienced by Russians are relevant from the linguistic point of view. Linguistic relevant expressions are possible above all with the words *Russian, French, German*, and also *Southern* and *Eastern* [...]. A quite significant part of linguistic relevant expressions (which are quite unquestionable) are linked to the words *English, American* [...]».

<sup>7</sup> An American, a French and a Russian are discussing about who of them is the most courageous.

- In America we choose ten cars, one of them doesn't have brakes and we drive in dangerous mountain roads. Then one of us ends up in hospital and the other nine visit him.

- In France we choose ten girls, one of them suffers from syphilis. Then one of us ends up in hospital and the other nine visit him.

- In Russia we are much more courageous. We tell political jokes in a company of ten people and we all know that one of us is a spy.

- And then?

- And then nine of us end up in prison and one takes to them packets and gifts.

ского духа, и символ страны, и основа национального характера, и форму, которую приняла американская душа»<sup>8</sup> (Genis 2002: 14). The car in jokes is the result of those qualities expressed by the Russian idioms: *amerikanskaja dinamičnosť*, *delovitost'*, *predpriimčivost'*<sup>9</sup>. In jokes Americans are rich, generous, self-confident, pragmatic, and brave; they love women and are ready to come to blow for them.

The image of the foreigner translating into Russian culture looses its complexity reducing to a selection of some stereotyped features. But on which bases are these features chosen? To be understood in Russian culture and to acquire the value of information, the foreign text has to simplify and to adapt to some cultural categories, existing in Russian culture. It means that its translation to be successful requires the pre-existence in the receiving culture of a representation of it. Foreigner texts, transferred in jokes, are always already experienced by Russians because for concrete socio-cultural reasons they are part of Russian culture. So, in jokes, stereotypes form on the basis of existing models, already typified. These models in connection to jokes play the role of prototypic texts, which are re-elaborated and transformed into a grotesque representation of themselves. As far as the model of the American is concerned, its image is elaborated during the XX century, mostly under the influence of mass culture. The so-called *vypuski*<sup>10</sup>, a low quality series of novels, with detective plots, quite popular at the beginning of the last century, first fixed the type of the American in Russian culture. Then, his representation was enriched by television culture, especially since the *perestrojka*. American films, showed regularly by Russian television, feature some stereotyped and recurring themes, emphasizing such details as car races and pursuits, luxurious and successful way of life.

The roots of the French type in Russian culture are very ancient. French culture began to play an important role since the XVIII century, in particular with the period of Ekaterina the Great, when French language started to be used as the language of aristocracy and the plots of French literature became familiar to the Russian reader. Actually the French type forms in culture under the influence of some paradigms of European literature of the XIX century. Then, the model reinforces its presence through television mass culture since the middle of the XX century. The stereotype of the French in Russian joke is always linked to the main theme of love and sex and it is reflected in language by idioms such as *francuzskaja pikantnost'*, *galantnost'*, *vetrenost'*<sup>11</sup>. The French hero in jokes plays the role of a passionate, sophisticated lover, of a brilliant seducer for whom the main goal in life is to enjoy love, sex and women's company. He has a wife and a mistress. French heroes are frivolous idlers, epicureans, thinking only about women, wine and gastronomic pleasures:

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<sup>8</sup> «The car is the concentration of the American mind, and the symbol of the country, and the basic idea of the national psychology and the form taken by the American soul».

<sup>9</sup> American dynamism, sense of initiative and of business.

<sup>10</sup> Booklets.

<sup>11</sup> *French charm, gallantry, fatuity.*

3. Встретились француз и русский. Разговорились о том, как можно обольстить женщину. Француз говорит:

- Я знакомаюсь с женщиной где-нибудь в ресторане, наливаю ей шампанского, танцуем, потом веду к себе домой, достаю вина, коньяки, виски - и она моя. Веду в спальню - и она в экстазе. Плату кладу ей в карман.

- У нас почти так же,- говорит русский.- Звоню к женщине, даю ей три рубля - и она моя. Потом отбираю три рубля - и она в экстазе!<sup>12</sup>.

We must remark that in jokes there is no gender differentiation and the stereotypes attributed to the type of the foreigner are valuable for individuals of both genders:

4. Валяется на улице пьяный мужчина. Реакция проходящих мимо женщин:  
Англичанка:

- Мужчина! Пьяный? Фу, какая непристойность!

Русская:

- О! Мужик! Пьяный? Ужрался, подлец, а дома - жена, дети.

Французенка:

- Ах, мужчина! Пьяный Один Один?! Такси! Такси!<sup>13</sup>

The French Madame stands out not only for her elegance, grace and charm, but also for her coquettishness and her attitude to flirt in any situation. As the French hero she leads a frivolous way of life, having love affairs with different men and not caring about husband and family. The dignity so important for the English milady of the joke associates with the famous sense of the own dignity cultivated by English. English snobbery and coldness, love for comfortable interiors with the fireside, the loyal dog and a bottle of strong whiskey, the religious following of the etiquette - these are the main stereotypes finding their prototype principally in television culture, in popular films such as the successful serial TV of the eighties "Sherlock Holmes and doctor Watson". To the creation of the English type certainly contributed also the

<sup>12</sup> A French and a Russian speak about the way to seduce a woman. The French says:

- I meet a woman in a restaurant, I pour out some champagne for her, we dance, then I take her to my house, we drink wine, cognac and she's mine. We go to bed and she goes into ecstasy. Then I put the money in her pocket.

- In our country it's almost the same – the Russian says – I call a woman, I give her three roubles and she's mine. Then I take back the three roubles and she goes into ecstasy!

<sup>13</sup> A drunk is tottering on the street. The reaction of the women passing by is this.

The English woman says:

- A man! He's drunk? What an indecency!

The Russian woman says:

- Oh! A man! He's drunk? What a coward! And his poor wife and children are waiting for him at home...

The French woman says:

- Ah, a man! He's drunk? He's alone? Alone. Taxi, taxi!



book by Vsevolod Ovčinnikov *Korni duba. Vpečatlenija i razmyslenija ob Anglii i angličanach* (The roots of the oak. About England and English people), which was quite popular in the seventies. In jokes English are perfect gentlemen, taciturn, pragmatic, introvert, they love cigars, horse-riding, they rigidly follow the etiquette in every situation.

The cultural identity of the hero in jokes is anticipated and formulated by the noun indicating his nationality. This noun relates to the fragment of world associated with it and has a predictive function, determining what has to be expected from individuals of different nationalities acting in different situations:

5. Двое мужчин и одна женщина оказываются на необитаемом острове. Как ведут себя представители разных народов?  
 Англичане устраивают дуэль из-за женщины.  
 Американцы затевают из-за нее драку.  
 Французы живут втроем.  
 Русские организуют колхоз: один - председатель, другой секретарь парторганизации, а "народа" они отправляют в поле<sup>14</sup>.

The duel is in accord to the stereotype of the English as gentlemen, the American fight to the well-known scenes from Hollywood films, and the French *ménage à trois* to the frivolous French habits. Russians behave without showing any interest and respect for women. The male chauvinism is in fact one of the main feature of the Russian stereotype.

#### 4. *The Russian identity*

In cross-cultural jokes the role of the "third" is always played by the Russian.

The border as a bidirectional filter links the sphere of one culture with the world outside. That is why jokes, as a border, allow the definition not only of the foreign identity but also of the own cultural specificity. As to Lotman, «Осознать себя в культурно-семиотическом отношении - значит осознать свою специфику, свою противопоставленность другим сферам<sup>15</sup>.» (Lotman 1984). This attitude forces to stress the absoluteness of the significant trait characterizing the own sphere. The function of demarcation, necessary to become aware of the own cultural specificity, is performed by the foreigner as representative of another culture. The opposition

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<sup>14</sup> Two men and a woman end up on a desert island. How do individuals from different countries behave?

English challenge each other to a duel for the woman.

Americans come to blows for the woman.

French happily live all together.

Russians organise a kolkhoz: one of them becomes the director, the other the secretary of the party organisation and they send "the lower class" to work in the fields.

<sup>15</sup> «Being aware of himself inside a system of cultural-semiotic relations means to become aware of the own specificity, of those traits which permit to consider himself in a relation opposite to other semiotic spheres».

between the Russian and the foreigner forces to underline the cultural specificity of the Russian:

6. Русский, англичанин и француз заспорили о том, какой национальности был Адам. Француз говорит:

- Конечно, Адам был французом! Кто еще так может обходительно и благородно обходиться с женщиной! Кто может так наслаждаться любовью!

- Нет, - говорит англичанин, - только настоящий джентльмен может отдать одно-единственное яблоко женщине!

Тут возразил русский:

- Господа! Бросьте спорить! Адам был настоящим русским человеком! Только русский, имея одно яблоко и живя с голой задницей, может считать, что он в раю!<sup>16</sup>

The structure of the text put emphasis on of the specificity of Russian culture. In the situation represented in the joke, a discussion, every character has to express his opinion. The replies of the French and the English correspond to their own stereotypes. The French acts as a sophisticated and passionate lover, the English as a gentleman. The definition of their nationality determines the predictability of their actions. The fact that the last reply is left to the Russian reinforces the role of contrasting background performed by the representatives of the other cultures. If the replies of the foreigners, even if attending to some stereotypes, correspond to a logic argument and under these stereotypes they are in some degree predictable, the behaviour of the Russian is absolutely unforeseeable. The unpredictability of his actions, which sometimes seem to be out of place, is emphasised by the position of his reply, at the end of the text. This creates a climax marking his auto-portrait by inventiveness and promptness as main features, realizing his communicative strategy. The Russian turns out as the cleverest, most perspicacious, with shrewdness and presence of mind, by which he's affirming the superiority of his culture:

7. Англичанин спрашивает жену:

- Скажите, дорогая Маргарет, вы изменяли мне за время нашей супружеской жизни?

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<sup>16</sup> A Russian, an English and a French have a discussion about what nationality was Adam.

The French says:

- Of course Adam was French! Who would be able to seduce a woman with such charming manners! Who would be able to enjoy love so much as French do!

- No! –the English replies– only a perfect gentleman like an English could give the only apple he has to a woman.

The Russian objects:

- Sirs! Please, stop discussing! Adam was a perfect Russian! Only a Russian, having one apple for two persons and strolling around with the ass naked, can be persuaded to be in paradise!

- Дорогой Джон, в прошлом году, как вы могли заметить, у меня появилось норковое манто.

Насколько я помню, вы мне его не покупали.

- Извините, дорогая.

Француз обращается к своей жене:

- Скажите, Жанна, изменяли ли вы мне за время нашей супружеской жизни?

- Дорогой Пьер, прошлым летом у меня появился “Ситроен”, на покупку которого вы мне денег не давали.

- Извините, дорогая.

Русский спрашивает жену:

- Послушай, Клава, скажи мне, как на духу, изменяла ли ты мне за нашу совместную жизнь?

- Ты же помнишь, Федя, прошлым летом у нас пропали твои кирзовые сапоги...<sup>17</sup>

In this joke the nouns inform about the nationalities of the characters, as they all are typical for the mentioned cultures. The linguistic behaviour of the characters also is the signal of their national belonging. The English couple, in spite of their close relationship, follow the etiquette of control and distance, the communication strategy adopted by the French couple is marked by the use of sweet nicknames. Russians distinguish by the establishment of a direct contact. The infidelity of English and French women is expressed by some presents that they have received from their lovers as according to the common sense, a coat for the English, and a Citroën for the French. The infidelity of the Russian woman is absurd, thinking with common logic. She doesn't receive any present, on the contrary she gives her husband's boots to her lover. In jokes Russians are reckless, undemanding, open-minded, sociable, simple, crazy, they love drink vodka and then fighting. For them the most important thing is to enjoy the male company, drink vodka and eat appetizers together:

8. Русский, американец и немец попали к людоедам. Им сказали:

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<sup>17</sup> An English asks to his wife:

- Dear Margaret, tell me please, have you been unfaithful to me during our marriage?

- Dear John, the last year, as you maybe remarked, I was wearing a mink coat. If I'm not wrong, you didn't buy it for me.

- Oh yes, you're right, sorry, my dear.

A French asks to his wife:

- Jeanne, baby, tell me please, have you been unfaithful to me during our marriage?

- Pierre, chéri, the last summer I was driving a Citroën, but you didn't give me money to buy it.

- Oh that's true, sorry, baby.

A Russian asks to his wife:

- Klava, listen to me, and try to be honest, have you been unfaithful to me during our marriage?

- Fedja, as you remember, the last summer your gumboots suddenly disappeared ...

- У нас есть в ущелье эхо. Вы будете кричать по очереди. Чьи слова эхо будет долго повторять, того оставим, остальных съедим.  
 Американец закричал: “Рейган!”.  
 Эхо повторило и замолкло.  
 Немец закричал: “Гитлер!”.  
 Эхо повторило и замолкло.  
 Русский как закричит:  
 - Мужики, в магазин водку завезли!  
 Эхо:  
 - Где, где, где... где, где, где?  
 И так целый час не могло успокоиться<sup>18</sup>.

Some features such as rudeness and boorishness are clearly reflected in his behaviour, especially in the violation of laws and in the lack of respect:

9. На дороге лежат часы. Проходит мимо аккуратный немец.  
 - Часы? В пыли?  
 Поднял, вынул платочек, смахнул пыль, положил на чистое место, на подставочку, пошел дальше. Подошел англичанин.  
 - О часы? Проверим.  
 Сверил со своим хронометром, поправил на двадцать четыре с половиной секунды, положил на место, пошел дальше.  
 Появился наш человек.  
 - Ага, часы?! Идут? Идут. Пошли со мной<sup>19</sup>.

Unlike the stereotypes about foreigners, in the model of the Russian there is a strong gender differentiation. If foreigners act in general according to common

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<sup>18</sup> A Russian, an American and a German are taken prisoner by the cannibals. The king of the cannibals tells them:

- In our canyon there is a strong echo. You have to shout in turn. We will leave alive the one of you whose words will be repeated by the echo the longest. The others we will eat.  
 The American shouts: “Reagan!”. The echo repeats one time and it shuts down.  
 The German shouts “Hitler!”. The echo repeats two times and it shuts down.  
 The Russian shouts: “Hey, guys! They’ve just brought vodka to the shop!”.  
 And the echo: “Where, where, where...”. And it continued for many hours.

<sup>19</sup> On the street there is a watch.

A German passes by:  
 - A watch?  
 He picks up the watch, he cleans it, he puts it on a safe place and he goes on.  
 An English passes by:  
 - Oh, a watch! Let’s control the functioning.  
 He controls the watch with his chronometry, he arranges it by 4 seconds, he puts it in a safe place and goes on.  
 A Russian passes by:  
 - Oho, a watch? It works? It works. Let’s take it home.

stereotypes, the semantic of the Russian woman is formed by stereotypes different from those referring to the male identity:

10. Встречаются как-то американка, француженка и русская. Ну американка говорит:

- Я своему мужу после свадьбы так и сказала: “Я тебе готовить не буду!”. Ну, день его не вижу, второй, а на третий приносит микроволновку, и сам себе готовит. Благодарь!

- А я, - говорит француженка, - то же своему сказала, что стирать ему не буду. День его не вижу, второй, а на третий приносит домой стиралку, и сам себе готовит. Классно!

Русская говорит:

- Я ему то же сказала, мол готовить, стирать, убирать я тебе не буду. День его не видела, второй, третий, а на четвертый правый глаз немного стал видеть<sup>20</sup>.

The Russian woman in jokes is submissive, good housekeeper, completely devoted to the family. She is not really an independent character; her function is rather to underline the trait of male chauvinism, which is one of the dominant features of the Russian hero.

##### 5. Conclusions. The “other” identity

The semiotic mechanism determining the functioning of cross-cultural jokes aims at the realization of the cultural transfer. The cultural transfer has to be understood as the semiotic dialogue between two or more texts belonging to different semiospheres and performed inside a certain culture. In this dialogue every text even if preserving its autonomy must have the tendency to become a text in the language of the receiving culture. To obtain this result the transferring text must contain the elements that will allow its translation into the language of the receiving culture. Otherwise, the cultural dialogue will not be possible, because the translated text, i.e. the foreign text, and the answer to it, i.e. the stereotype, have to form a third text, i.e. the joke, which will be able to contain the new information. These elements, essential for the transfer, allow to the

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<sup>20</sup> Three women meet, an American, a French and a Russian.

The American woman says:

- After the marriage I told to my husband that I will not cook for him. One day I didn't see him, the second the same, the third he comes back with a microwave oven and now he cooks by himself! Great!

The French woman says:

- After the marriage I told to my husband that I will not do the laundry. One day I didn't see him, the second the same, the third he comes back with a washing machine! Cool!

The Russian woman says:

- After the marriage me too I told to my husband that I will not cook, do the laundry, clean the apartment... One day I didn't see him, the second the same, the third the same, the fourth my right eye began to see a little!

member of the receiving culture to identify the foreign text and to put it in already existing categories, provided by the same culture.

Joke is an intertext assembling texts from different other cultures. Foreign texts transferring into Russian jokes change in texts encoded in the language of the receiving culture, i.e. in stereotypes. The stereotypes are formed by the mechanism of the distorted mirror. The representations of foreigners, already existing in Russian culture, become the prototypes for the creation of the stereotypes. These representations, transformed into stereotypes, are reduced to some features, exaggerated up to the grotesque, and chosen because they have no correspondence in Russian culture and for this reason they are semiotically significant in the determination of the identity of the foreigner. The process of the inclusion in a common cultural world and the consequent reciprocal consciousness of the respective specificity provoke not only the rapprochement of different cultures, but also their specialisation. Transferring in a new cultural common sphere every culture begins to cultivate its specificity.

#### 6. Conclusions. *The Russian identity*

For the research project on which this paper is based, I collected jokes from Russian joke sites on Internet and among Russian people. The main advantage of this survey method consists in assuring the actuality of the collected material. However, a semiotic lecture of the texts shows that these jokes, even if told at present time, first appeared during the seventies. Certain details such as the delivery of vodka in shops, the shortage of goods and the arrest for telling political jokes, are evident signs of Soviet way of life. For this reason, we can assume that the heroes acting in jokes are not only individuals representing different cultures of the same importance and value, but also the representatives of the two basic socio-political systems: the Capitalist world indicated by French and US citizens, and the Socialist one by Russians. So, the competition between Russians and foreigners in jokes can be seen as a comic projection of the real ideological antagonism between these two socio-political systems. In the same way, the cultural representations the jokes are based on, are mostly provided by the official Soviet propaganda. In fact, the analyzed cross-cultural jokes arise as a general parody of Soviet myths about the *Homo Sovieticus*.

The juxtaposition between the Russian and the two foreigners aims to a grotesque reaffirmation of the Russian ethno-cultural superiority. In jokes the Russian goes through a procedure of self-mockery. His official image as a conscious, honest, responsible and well-mannered citizen is demythologized and he transforms in a troublemaker, a rude type, aggressive and dishonest, who tells political anti-soviet jokes, don't care about family, and whose main worry is to drink vodka with friends. Nevertheless, in spite of the extreme negativity of his character, emphasised by the contrast with the neutrality of the foreigners, the Russian successfully overcomes the difficult test of self-mockery and finally he becomes a sort of *bogatyr*, an epic hero able to find the right solution for any kind of problems. Compared with foreigners, in jokes, Russians are always in a position not only of moral and intellectual inferiority, but also of material disadvantage. If the foreigner is generally represented as a

charming gentleman and a respectable citizen acting in a pleasant world full of mink coats, luxurious cars and charming women, the Russian better remind a sort of primitive, whose life is a continuous fight for the survival and the only pleasure he can afford is a prostitute for three roubles and some vodka. But the Russian in jokes has the right to have the last word and his actions are so unexpected and unforeseeable that they acquire the value of geniality, especially if compared to the ordinary and the predictability of the foreigner's ones.

Russians, in spite of their grotesque representation, proving the wrongness of the official *clichés* divulged by propaganda, result winners of the ideological competition between the Capitalist world and the Socialist one. The Soviet official picture of Russian ethnic superiority over the foreigners is born out by jokes.

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### *Abstract*

Federica Visani

*«An American, a French and a Russian meet on a desert island...». The representation of the foreigner and the cultural transfer in Russian contemporary jokes.*

With the progressive unification of Europe's political space, the determination of the cultural identity through the juxtaposition of cultures is a central and semiotically innovative subject. The concept of border is applied to this juxtaposition, simultaneously separating and unifying cultures, and allowing the cultural dialogue. This mechanism is analysed through Russian jokes about foreigners. The jokes work as a filter translating the type of the foreigner into the Russian culture. The transfer from an external semiotic space to the Russian internal one transforms the foreigner into a simplified representation of himself adapting it to the hosting culture.