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Black Humour in COVID-19 As a Comic and Irreverent Analysis

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the funny stories and jokes coined by people during the spread of the corona virus. Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) first appeared in China as a viral pneumonia in late 2019, and quickly identified as a global pandemic throughout the most countries of the world by March of 2020. The spreading and transmitting the virus was so rapid that surprised the world, and it appeared in a time whenever the world was not ready to stop this virus. The negative impact was astonishing and shocking as the virus caused a huge fatality. Furthermore, the lack of a vaccine to stop the virus, and the imposed situation of the home quarantine psychologically caused great stress, hesitation and fear among the societies. Despite the trauma and fear, which were caused by the virus, some sort of jokes and funny stories were narrated and coined among the different cultures. In this paper, the researchers are going to use the literary device 'black humour' as a genre of comic irreverence to analyse those jokes, and to show the effects of them in the different cultures. The data, which are going to be analysed depending on the literary device 'black humour', include some selected jokes that have been coined during the spread of the corona virus by the people of Kurdistan-Iraq and some other countries around the world. The data comprise flippant examples of political and social affairs.

Research Question

How are the funny speeches represented during the serious and fatal period of COVID-19 outbreak? To what extent can the literary device 'black humour' illustrate the cultural background behind those jokes?

1- Introductions

The spreading of coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) at the beginning of 2020, and its huge fatality was not expected by the world. There were several factors behind the rapid spreading of the virus, including the lack of essential medical kits, the lack of people's immunity and the slow attempt of the authorities to oblige people starting contact limit from the beginning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Table 1 shows the top ten countries concerning the COVID-19 outbreak till 1st April 2020:

Table 1. Coronavirus Cases till 1st April 2020 (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>)

Countries	Total Cases	Total Deaths	Total Recovered	Active Cases
USA	188,592	4,055	7,251	177,286
Italy	105,792	12,428	15,729	77,635
Spain	95,923	8,464	19,259	68,200
China	81,554	3,312	76,238	2,004
Germany	71,808	775	16,100	54,993
France	52,128	3,523	9,444	39,161
Iran	44,605	2,898	14,656	27,051
UK	25,150	1,789	135	23,226
Switzerland	16,605	433	1,823	14,349
Turkey	13,531	214	243	13,074
The world	860,184	42,344	178,442	639,398

It is evident that the sickening and death of thousands of people have caused the whole

citizens of the world to suffer psychologically. The necessities and the new kinds of obligation, imposed on them, to prevent themselves do not fit the different societies if their social, economic, and cultural background are taken into account (Qiu et al., 2020). Consequently, traumatic and psychoanalytic researchers are exerting to reveal the mental health issues and find a solution and remedy for those who are under the pressure of this global pandemic disease (Wade, Hardy, Howell, & Mythen, 2013; Xue et al., 2015). The main reason of people's anxiety and mental instability relates to the fact that, in the next couple of months until 1st June 2020, the COVID-19 fatalities increased several times, which is shown in table 2.

Table 2. Coronavirus Cases till 1st June 2020 (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>)

Countries	Total Cases	Total Deaths	Total Recovered	Active Cases
USA	1,815,268	105,532	530,199	1,179,537
Brazil	498,440	28,834	205,371	264,235
Russia	396,575	4,555	167,469	224,551
Spain	286,308	27,125	196,958	62,225
UK	272,826	38,376	N/A	N/A
Italy	232,664	33,340	155,633	43,691
France	188,625	28,771	68,268	91,586
Germany	183,294	8,600	164,900	9,794
India	181,827	5,185	86,937	89,706
Turkey	163,103	4,515	126,984	31,604
The world	6,146,622	370,453	2,727,250	3,048,919

Henceforward, COVID-19 leads to a real fear in the people's heart due to the immense increasement of the virus and the lack of an exact cure or vaccine and consequently "Mental health researchers, practitioners, and those working in professions in which trauma exposure is routine must find ways to work more closely together to test novel interventions to protect and reduce the incidence of COVID- 19-related traumatic stress" (Horesh & Brown, 2020: 333). Despite the medical reason, some other factors may distress people such as discrimination, looting, robbery and bias faced by different cultural groups mostly because of hunger resulting from home quarantine (Galea, Tracy, Norris, & Coffey, 2008).

Due to the vulnerability and consequences of any pandemic, it is obvious that, not only the affected people and their families, the lives of the doctors and their co-workers are in danger as well (Rodén-Foreman et al., 2017). For this reason, special attention should be given to these health workers so that they can manage their daily substantial works (Van Mol et al., 2015).

2- Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which is intended to be used for analysing the data of this paper is 'black humour'. The term black humour, also called black comedy or dark humour, is a subgenre of comedy which is always associated to the great satirist Aristophanes. Aristophanes Philippus (448 b.c. – 385 b.c.) is well-known as one of the greatest comedic playwrights throughout the history. Concerning his literary works, forty-four of his plays have been survived of which *Assemblywomen* is the shortest which includes 1183 lines and the longest one is *Birds* at 1765 of Greek verse. Aristophanes started his career as a satirist who was criticising and attacking other poets and the politicians (Robson, 2013). The dark humour in Aristophanes' works illustrates a negative perspective as it "allows the writer to be possessed by a spirit of nonsense, absurdity, and contradiction so that he may undertake his supremely difficult task of raising earthly existing to a new plane of being" (Cowan, 1984: 1). Nevertheless, Whitman (2013) confidently identifies Aristophanes as the master of all the modes of comedy including satire, wit, humour and nonsense.

Andre Breton was the first one who devised the term 'black humour' in 1935, while

reading and analysing the works of Jonathan Swift. Breton's perspective and evaluation relating to Swift's writings was to reveal the comic and sarcastic modes in a serious subject matter such as death. Then, black humour could be investigated and interpreted in a lot of literary works including the novels *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut, *V* (1967) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) by Thomas Pynchon. The mode of black humour has been applied to playwrights and plays as well, such as *Les Chaises* (1954) by Eugene Ionesco, *Pantagruel* (2014) by Francois Rabelais, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Voltaire's Candide* (1759) by Jonathan Swift, and some of Shakespeare's plays (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

Thus, the term 'black humour' has been applied to different literary and non-literary works for multiple comic and satiric modes. Furthermore, it has been identified and defined according to the distinct characteristics of the mode. This diversity denotes that "Defining dark humour is virtually impossible because its manifestation in great literature necessarily involves irony, the trope in which you say one thing and mean another, sometimes the

opposite of what is said" (Bloom & Hobby, 2010: xv). Generally, black humour has been defined to be a literary device which is used to deal with a serious and sober subject in a non-serious and humorous way. Consequently, it can be construed that black humour "is a genre of comic irreverence that flippantly attacks society's most sacredly serious subjects-especially death" (Gehring, 1996: 139). This is exactly what we are going to use in this paper, which is well suited to the analysis of our data, to investigate and examine the unserious jokes and stories coined during the serious and disastrous period of COVID-19.

3- The Practical Part

Here, depending on the literary tool of 'black humour', the researchers are going to discuss and analyse the unserious and flippant activities and speeches recounted by the different societies around the world during the serious and risky pandemic period of COVID-19 in 2020. These flippant speeches could be realized to be related to political and social affairs.

3.1. Political Black Humour

Despite the social flippant discourses coined during the COVID-19 outbreak, there have

been numerous political humours devised for distinct purposes as “Political humour is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions. Within that broad category, political *satire* occupies a specific role” (Young, 2017: 3).

Ahval News website indicates a political black humour occurred in Turkey during the COVID-19. According to the news, the progovernment parties link the corona virus to the conspiracy theories as they jestingly proclaim that the same day as a new opposition party is announced, the government identifies the first corona virus outbreak. A member of the Islamic ruling party recognizes this new secular party to be more dangerous than the corona virus. In the news, it is also composed that Zionism is behind the outbreak of the corona virus, and consequently this infidel virus must be eliminated by the Islamic army. Here, the government’s statement provokes black humour, as they are trying to manipulate their people, abuse their opponents and use the virus for their own political benefits.

Guardian News (2020) published a video on YouTube indicating a funny movement made by the USA president Donal Trump. Dr. Deborah Birx, who is the White House

coronavirus task force response coordinator, is standing by the president and mentioning that she has already been tested for COVID-19, and that she has some sort of fever. While hearing Birx’s doubt about her health, the president Donald Trump jestingly and in an attractive way moves away from the press conference stage. Furthermore, in another press conference, the president Donald Trump is jokingly talking about the models. This unnecessary flippancy does not bring laughter even to the Vice President Mike Pence who is standing quietly behind the president. These two behaviours and speeches, conducted by Donald Trump, employ black humour. The USA president’s jokes are told in exactly a time that thousands of Americans have been affected with the virus, and thousands are going to die. Thus, he is talking about a very unserious and funny subjects in a very serious and critical situations.

3.2. Social Black Humour

During the dangerous period of COVID-19 epidemic, a lot of jokes and pranks have been devised by people of different cultures around the world. These flippant stories encode different perspectives due to the different cultural background of societies. Table 3 shows some examples which are

taken from anonymous social media sources in Kurdistan-Iraq:

Table 3. Examples of Black Humour from Kurdistan-Iraq

Translated texts in English	Original Texts in Kurdish language
1- A woman checks her husband's cell phone and finds out a saved contact number by the name COVID-19. She decides to find out who is it. While calling that name, she realizes that her own cell phone is ringing.	١- ژنێك سهیر مۆبایلی مێردهكهی نهكات ناوێك به كۆفید ١٩ خهزن كراوه! ئه ئێ ئه ئییت بزاتم ئه مه كێیه. ته له فون نهكات و سهیر نهكات جهههس بۆ مۆبایلهكهی خۆی دیت.
2- When a 48 hours of quarantine was announced in Kurdistan-Iraq, a friend had bought 7 kilos of banana. He was told "Is not it too much for 48 hours?" He felt embarrassed and said "I want it to make pickles".	٢- كاتێك ٤٨ سهعات كهههنتینه پاكهیهنرا، برادههرك ٧ كیلۆ مۆزی كریبوو. پێیان وتبوو ٧ كیلۆ زۆرنه بۆ ٤٨ سهعات؟ نهوش له شههرمه وتبووی بۆ تورشیات كریومه.
3- A man in Kalar town, from Kurdistan-Iraq says, "You do not have to be afraid, people of Kalar are brave and fearless. We have got RPG and PK guns to confront coronavirus.	٣- پیاوێك له كههههه ئه ئییت له كۆرۆنا مهترسن، كههههه لهكی قارهمانی تیایه. ئییه ناربیجیمان پێیه، بیكه یسیمان پێیه، به ئاسانی كۆرۆنا تێك نه شكێنین.

The above three examples are bringing laughter to the audience since they can be seen as strong comic irreverence. They are all indicating a sort of humour which is related to the social and cultural backgrounds of Kurdish people. In example 1, the woman intends to find out a contact number, in her husband's cell phone, which is compared to a virus. The funny moment is revealed when she finds herself to be the same contact number. Then, in example 2, the man's explanation of making pickles from banana is extremely funny, as pickles obviously cannot be made from banana. Furthermore, in example 3, the man's extraordinary enthusiasm for killing the coronavirus by RPG and PK guns is much more humorous, which is far from the scientific and medical equipment as a cure to eliminate the virus. Eventually, all the three flippant stories employ black humour as they are jokingly coined in a time whenever the Kurdistan region is under a serious and critical imposed quarantine because of the threat of the coronavirus.

On the other hand, among the European communities, the jokes can be observed to be related to their cultural backgrounds and customs which are totally different from the ones coined in Kurdistan-Iraq. Table 4 indicates some examples of black humour:

Table 4. Examples of Black Humour among European Communities (Laurineavicius & Balciuskas, 2020)



As one can see, in the table above, the four quotes are examples of funny jokes which have been the most two recognisable humours coined by the European people during the COVID-19 outbreak. From the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak and the quarantine enforcement at the beginning of 2020, toilet paper shortage became an apparent crisis in some part of the world, especially the USA and the European countries. The two examples above, which are related to toilet paper, refer to the eagerness of people who are trying to buy

rolls of toilet paper as much as they can. Here, the real humour can be observed when people are impatient and enthusiastic to think of the toilet paper (only this among other daily necessities) and save a lot of them during the fatal period of the coronavirus epidemic.

The next two pictures at the bottom of table 4 above also illustrate examples of social black humour. During the COVID-19 quarantine enforcement, children have been obliged to stay at home the whole day, rather than going to school or anywhere else. As the parents and guardians are not used to spending time with their children for a long period of time, they have been getting tired and bored. Thus, despite of the dangers existing outside their home and the possibility of getting affected with the virus, the parents jokingly express that they are not interested with the children staying at home "Being quarantined with a talkative child is like having an insane parrot superglued to your shoulder" Laurineavicius & Balciuskas, 2020: 46).

4- Conclusion

This section summarises the results of the analysis in this paper. The researchers will first begin with the research questions presented at the beginning of the paper and explain the black humour that were

ascertained from the analysis of the quotes in our data in turn. The results of the analysis presented in this paper have answered two main questions, which are: How are the funny speeches represented during the serious and fatal period of COVID-19 outbreak? To what extent can the literary device 'black humour' illustrate the cultural background behind those jokes? The fundamental aims of these questions are related to the researchers' investigation of the black humour in the flippant stories represented during the fatal period of COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. In the analysis, it was revealed that political black humour could be employed as the coronavirus has been used jestingly by some political leaders and parties for ideological and political benefits. This political manifestation is somehow related to irony; another type of comedy which means the opposite of what is being said. On the other hand, social black humour could be investigated differently according to the social and cultural background. In Kurdistan-Iraq, the jokes and pranks have been recounted in a different way compared to those made in the USA and the European countries. The flippant stories in Kurdistan-Iraq are exactly related to the peoples' social lives and customs such as family affairs and

the individuals' thoughts and perspectives. Nevertheless, the jokes in the USA and the European countries are related to the household stuffs crises and the family members' recklessness. These unserious jokes about trivial stuffs are made in a very serious and sober period whenever thousands are going to die.

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