



WHO? MORE?

BY DAVID LOWE

WARNING: this article contains very bad jokes and bilingual semiotics.* If you experience dizziness or nausea, stop reading immediately.

A bilingual pun is a pun that requires the knowledge of two languages to understand the joke.

What did one stiff say to the other stiff?

– Are you *raidi*? (Are you ready?)

“Stiff” in English is the slang equivalent of *macchabée*, but it also means *raide* (*manquant de souplesse*).

What do you call a Frenchman in sandals?

Philippe Philoppe (flip-flops).

“Flip-flops” are *tongs*, so the joke is not strictly bilingual, rather *bi-tongues* (*bi-tongs*)!

In the bilingual pun, the two languages do not just meet on the borderline, but actually penetrate each other’s semantic territory.

How does your stomach feel after having too much French bread? *Pain*-full. (Painful)

Here’s a small one: 4 = *petit four*.

And while we’re in the culinary domaine:

Why did the chef take his own life?

Because he lost “the *huile d’olive*” (the will to live).

Why don’t the French eat two eggs for breakfast?

Because one egg is *un œuf*! (one egg is enough).

Bilingual puns serve “as a bridge between two separate and seemingly autonomous language systems”.

What sound do bilingual French ducks make?

Corner, corner (*coin, coin*).

Such wordplay points at the ways in which the borders of languages can become fluid when they come in contact with each other.

A Frenchman sees a seal and points at it exclaiming, “*Phoque!*”

The seal is taken aback and retorts: “What’s the matter, you don’t like seals?”

C’est vache, le chaos (le cow).

The necessary condition for a pun (*calembour*) is a context in which multiple and disparate meanings of the pun word are acceptable.

This woman walked into a bar and asked for a double entendre... so the barman gave her one.

In fact, following a broad definition of translation, human communication is itself an act of translation. We are in-between languages, even inside our own language: when we learn to speak, we are already learning to translate.

Three little French kittens were skating on thin ice... un, deux, trois, *quatre cinq* (cats sank).

Why do the French call their swimming pools *piscines*? Because they “piss in” them.

We should conclude that all puns are in a sense bilingual, because of the interplay between the non-language of the raw consciousness and the “word-language” of the mother tongue into which the thought is “translated”.

What do you call a Canadair [tanker plane] after it has got rid of its load? A Canada Dry.

Hors d’œuvre = out of work

The motto of the French navy: “To the water! The hour has come!”, or, in French, *A l’eau. C’est l’heure!* (Hello sailor!)

Nice (the city) is nice (*agréable*).

A monolingual tautology, a bilingual pun.

An extremely rare German (bilingual) joke:

What comes between fear and sex (*vier and sechs*)? *Fünf*.

And, finally, one in Latin.

In the 19th century, when General Napier had conquered the province of Sindh in Pakistan, it was claimed that he sent a one-word telegram to England which simply said “*Peccavi*”, which is, of course, Latin for “I have sinned” (I have Sindh)... and that’s all I have to say.

(David) Lowe (*l’eau*) runs dry.

*I’m not sure what it means either.

FURTHER READING: Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Act 3, Scene 4.