The Living Bjørnson: A Pragmatic Analysis of a Political Joke Published in the Magazine *Osa* (1932)

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Abstract

The study presents an analysis of a political cartoon published in the humoristic and satirical magazine Osa *in 1932, reflecting the celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's birth. Its aim is to contribute to the research on the reception of the Norwegian writer B. Bjørnson in Slovakia – specifically, to complement existing studies of his reception by examining representations of Bjørnson in the Slovak-language press, where he was mainly received as a figure with political influence. The analysis draws on linguistic theories of humor and approaches the verbal joke research, through the examination of communicative roles, as an effective tool of ideological appropriation.*

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Keywords: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; Milan Ivanka; *Osa* magazine; political humor; linguistic theories of humor; ideological appropriation.

Introduction

The analyzed joke, published in the satirical magazine *Osa* (1932, volume 1, issue 50, p. 6), mocks, during the celebrations of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's hundredth birthday, the presence of the Slovak delegation in Oslo, and in particular one of its members. The illustration and the accompanying caption ("How the friend of Slovak Liberty would have rewarded the double-tongued Milan for the phrases spoken in Oslo, if he could have moved from the pedestal of his monument..." [1]) create a scene in which a national symbol – the statue of Bjørnson – comes to life to impose a moral punishment on a domestic political figure.

[1] All quotations from the contemporary press have been translated by the author of this paper.

At the outset, it should be noted that although Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was primarily known as a man of letters, he was also a highly critical publicist whose articles and speeches sparked polemics and political debates. According to Milan Žitný (2012: 68), he authored around 3,000 newspaper articles and 30,000 letters, and was an intensely active lecturer. His political engagement and his concern for the situation and national revival of the peoples of Central Europe – particularly their cultural and political emancipation, including that of the Slovaks within the Kingdom of Hungary – made him well known among the Slovak intellectual elite and relatively frequently received in the periodical press of the time. As Žitný (2012: 74) further notes, Bjørnson first came to the attention of Slovak readers in 1904, through excerpts from his article *Peace Hypocrisy*, which were published in Tomáš G. Masaryk's magazine *Čas*. His contacts with Slovak and Czech intellectuals intensified in 1907 and 1908, with the Czech figures Edvard Lederer, Adolf Heyduk, and Karel Kálal playing an important mediating role. Their efforts resulted in a series of Bjørnson's public interventions in defense of the Slovaks. In 1907, he dedicated an article to the events in Černová, in which he condemned the massacre that occurred on October 27, 1907, in the village of Černová near Ružomberok in northern central Slovakia. During the incident, the police opened fire on villagers, killing fifteen people and injuring dozens. The villagers had been protesting against the decision that their church – built at their own expense – should be consecrated by a priest appointed by the authorities. Roman Holec states the following about Bjørnson's reactions to the events in Černová:

> "*The Černová massacre provided Bjørnson's journalism with a strong argument for the legitimacy of attacks against the Hungarian government, which was pretending to be innocent, and also gave him credibility before that part of the international public that viewed the unmasking of the Hungarian regime with skepticism. [...] Although he does not always describe the circumstances of the Černová bloodshed with complete accuracy, his international authority ensured an extraordinary response to all his articles*" (Holec 1997: 144, trans. KM).

The main informant from Slovakia, as noted by Holec (1997: 145), was primarily Vladimír Hurban, the Slovak writer, publicist, and later diplomat, who translated Bjørnson's famous article *The Greatest Hungarian Industry* for Slovak-language newspapers *Národné noviny* and *Národný hlásnik*. When the article became the subject of a lawsuit, Hurban also assumed criminal responsibility for it. As Holec (1997: 145, author's translation) points out, "[t]he state authorities were most offended by any form of com-

ment in agreement, however minor, or by the complete absence of any dissent regarding Bjørnson."

It can be stated that in the Slovak-language periodical press of the 1920s and 1930s, Bjørnson was still represented as a symbol of moral and intellectual authority. As Žitný writes, quoting Karol Rosenbaum (1970: 131, trans. KM): "He was respected by the patriots of Martin, led by Svetozár Hurban Vajanský, and even his opponents, the *hlasists* and *prúdists*, showed him great esteem."[2] (2012: 69, trans. KM). Žitný adds that "[...] he was also respected by Slovak social democrats and political representatives of the conservative Hlinka's Slovak People's Party " (Žitný 2012: 69, trans. KM).

After the years 1907 and 1908, when Bjørnson was celebrated in contemporary periodicals as a defender of the Slovaks, he once again attracted attention in 1932, when the 100th anniversary of his birth was commemorated.


Björnstjerne Björnson.

Source: *Slovenský ľud*, 1932/12, nr. 50, p. 675

In addition to *Slovenský ľud* (1932/12, issue 50, p. 675), the anniversary was also reported by other periodicals, including *Slovenský učiteľ* (1932/14, issue 4, p. 186), *Robotnícke noviny* (1932/29, issue 280, p. 5), *Slovenská*

[2] *Hlasists* (*hlasisti*) and *prúdists* (*prúdisti*) were groups of Slovak intellectuals from the early 20th century, named after the journals *Hlas* ("The Voice") and *Prúdy* ("Currents"). They represented a younger, modernist generation that opposed the conservative nationalism of Svetozár Hurban Vajanský. Svetozár Hurban Vajanský (1847–1916) was a prominent Slovak writer, journalist, and politician, and a leading figure in the Slovak national movement. He advocated for Slovak cultural and political rights within Hungary and played a key role in developing Slovak literary and public life.

vlasť (1932/14, issue 50, p. 3), and several others. It might be more relevant to ask which outlets did not report on this jubilee. In many of these the special delegation representing Czechoslovakia at the celebrations in Oslo was also mentioned: "For the Czechoslovak government, the celebrations were attended by the Czechoslovak envoy Hurban and a special Czechoslovak delegation, which included the Slovak member of parliament Dr. Ivanka, the writer Dr. Lederer, and the trade union adviser Dr. Walter." (*Slovenský východ*, 1932/14, issue 282, p. 1) Eduard Lederer (1859–1944) was a Czechoslovak writer, dramatist, and poet, professionally a lawyer, who actively supported the Slovak and Czech national movements and corresponded with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson on the oppression of Slovaks in Hungary. Emil Walter (1890–1964) was a Czech translator and diplomat, serving as cultural attaché in Scandinavia and later as Czechoslovak ambassador to Norway, translating works from Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Old Norse. Vladimír Hurban (1883–1949) was a Slovak writer, translator, and diplomat, and the son of Svetozár Hurban Vajanský. He served as a prominent Czechoslovak diplomat, holding posts in Egypt and Sweden, with accreditation also for Norway and Lithuania. As I have already mentioned, in 1908 Hurban was sentenced to prison for translating and publishing Bjørnson's article. At that time, he was represented in court by Dr. Milan Ivanka (see *Národný Hlásnik*, 1908/41, issue 11, p. 5), the fourth member of the Czechoslovak delegation, who in this particular joke appears as its other protagonist alongside Bjørnson.

Analysis of the joke

In addition to the so-called serious press, Bjørnson was also featured in humorous magazines, as this specific example of a joke from *Osa* demonstrates. Analyzing the joke, according to the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo 1994: 222-226), one can focus on six Knowledge Resources: Language, Narrative Strategy, Target, Situation, Logical Mechanism, and Script Opposition.

Regarding language, this Knowledge Resource comprises "[…] all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text. It is responsible for the exact wording of the text and for the placement of the functional elements that constitute it" (Attardo, 1994: 223).

Source: *Osa*, 1932, volume 1, issue 50, p. 6

I will now repeat the text appearing below the image depicting the statue of B. Bjørnson, preparing to step down from its pedestal with an angry expression on his face: "How the friend of Slovak Liberty would have rewarded the double-tongued Milan for the phrases spoken in Oslo, if he could have moved from the pedestal of his monument..." (*Osa*, 1932, volume 1, issue 50, p. 6). The text beneath the cartoon takes the form of a hypothetical conditional sentence ("How he would have rewarded… if he had been able to move…"), which implies that such a situation would have been unpleasant for the addressee (Milan Ivanka). From a pragmatic perspective, it can also be described as an indirect speech act. On the surface level, it appears to be a "speculative hypothesis," but in reality, it functions as a mocking criticism whose true intention is ridicule. The incorrectly written first name *Björnstome* instead of *Bjørnstjerne* was presumably not intentional; the typographical emphasis directly beneath the image of the statue draws attention to whom the statue represents. After reading the caption, it becomes clear that two figures meet in the joke: „the friend of Slovak Freedom" and „the double-tongued Milan".

In the case of Bjørnson[3], he was given titles such as "our great defender" (*Živena*, 1934/24, issue 1, p. 20), "star from the North" (*Elán*, 1939/9, issue 5-6, p. 1), and "great champion of the Slovaks" (*Mladý život*, 1946/2, issue 8, p. 7) appearing in periodicals aimed at different audiences and published on various occasions (see Gulašová 2024 for more). In the analyzed joke, he is referred to as "friend of Slovak Freedom," which corresponds with epithets appearing in contemporary press, for example, *Robotnícke noviny* (1932/29, issue 280, p. 5) called him "friend of freedom and liberty," and even "its fanatic." The most significant example comes from *Slovenský denník* (1933/16, issue 188, p. 2), which records the inscription on one of the wreaths laid on Bjørnson's grave signed by Milan Hodža[4]: "To the stately pioneer of our freedom, Milan Hodža." In the same article, Bjørnson is called "the immortal pioneer of our freedom".

As Nadežda Jurčišinová notes (2012: 181), among the prominent figures representing the Slovak national-emancipation movement at the beginning of the twentieth century was Milan Ivanka, a lawyer, journalist, and member of the Hungarian Parliament. Even after the establishment of Czechoslovakia, he remained an active builder of the new state, having already demonstrated in the prewar period a positive attitude toward the Czechs and the development of cooperation with them. He valued expressions of interest in the life of Slovaks outside Hungary, particularly the attitude of the Norwegian prose writer and publicist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Accordingly, he encouraged Svetozár Hurban Vajanský to initiate and carry out a petition in gratitude to this publicist on behalf of the Slovak nation, and in 1908 he similarly appealed to Vajanský to cooperate with the British historian and journalist Robert William Seton-Watson (Jurčišinová, 2012: 184). The epithet "double-tongued" in the mentioned joke alludes precisely to his pro-Czechoslovak stance, with which he was frequently associated. In the magazine *Kocúr* (1923/1-4, issue 36, pp. 401), Milan Ivanka is literally depicted with a split tongue. In a short dictionary published in the same magazine (1928/6, issue 10, p. 148), the word *polyglot* is explained with the synonym Milan Ivanka, with the note "(has two tongues)" in parentheses. In the mag-

[3] It should be noted that he was not the only one who supported the Slovaks in their efforts toward national emancipation; other foreign figures also played similarly significant roles, including Robert William Seton-Watson – "Scotus Viator," William Ritter – "Helvetus Viator," Ernest Denis and others.

[4] Milan Hodža (1878–1944) was a Slovak politician, journalist, and diplomat. He was a leading figure among the Czechoslovak centralists and later served as Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia (1935–1938), advocating for modernization and democratic reforms within the state.

azine *Osa*, he is referred to as "the double-tongued lawyer" (1932/1, issue 15, p. 8).

Regarding the narrative strategy, Attardo (1994: 224) notes that "[…] any joke has to be cast in some form of narrative organization, either as a simple (framed) narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a (pseudo-)riddle, as an aside in conversation, etc." The joke at the center of this text is very concisely structured around the hypothetical action of the statue, which is to step down from its pedestal to set things straight with the disobedient "double-tongued Milan." Michael Billig argues that laughter not only subverts but also often serves to maintain social order: by ridiculing those who break norms, the norms themselves are reinforced. Billig (2005: 202) distinguishes between disciplinary and rebellious humor: "To begin with, a distinction can be made between two sorts of humour: disciplinary and rebellious humour. Both types can be seen as forms of ridicule. Disciplinary humour mocks those who break social rules, and thus can be seen to aid the maintenance of those rules. Rebellious humour mocks the social rules, and, in its turn, can be seen to challenge, or rebel against, the rules." In this case, the norm for the audience is a nationally oriented stance; Ivanka is allegedly violating it, so the humor serves to publicly reprimand him. Ideology is thus reinforced through laughter – those who do not laugh are implicitly seen as "not one of us." By laughing, the audience implicitly affirms the norm: to be correctly nationally oriented. The symbol (Bjørnson's statue) is removed from its original cultural/national context (celebrations in Norway) and placed into the Slovak political framework. This shift transforms the statue from a neutral cultural monument into a political instrument in a specific debate. The audience is led to feel that "even the great Bjørnson would be on our side," which produces a strong ideological effect. This can be described as ideological appropriation functioning as a reinforcing mechanism: invoking the authority of Bjørnson[5] increases the weight of the ridi-

[5] A similar role of a moral arbiter was attributed to Scotus Viator (R. W. Seton-Watson). As an example, we can mention a cartoon published in the magazine *Kocúr* (1923/1-4, issue 36, pp. 396), where he also appears as a prop, vehicle, and authority. The image depicts the replacement of a sign reading *Posádkové velitelství* (in Czech, "Garrison Command") with a Slovak-language version, *Vojenské veliteľstvo*. The caption below reads: "In Bratislava before the visit of Scotus Viator. — Civilian (in Czech, author's note): Why are you taking down that sign now, in the fifth year of the Republic? Officer (also in Czech, author's note): Well, you know Scotus Viator is coming. We don't want him to say that those 'Ľudáks' are right about everything." In English, "ľudák" refers to a member or supporter of HSĽS, a conservative, nationalist movement advocating Slovak autonomy within Czechoslovakia.

cule. Laughter and humor thus operate as a dual sanction: on one hand, disciplining by ridiculing Ivanka for his stance; on the other hand, legitimizing the critique by employing a "nationally pure" authority (Bjørnson) to confirm that the ridicule is justified. The joke leverages Bjørnson's authority to strengthen the criticism of Ivanka, creating the impression that this criticism has an international, "Norwegian" moral foundation. Laughter rewards those who understand and share the ideological code of HSĽS – a conservative Hlinka's Slovak People's Party.

The target of the joke (Milan Ivanka) is mocked as someone acting "against the interests of the nation," and the ideological appropriation of the Bjørnson symbol serves to enhance the persuasiveness of the ridicule: a major cultural authority is depicted as taking "our" side.

> „*The target KR (Knowledge recources – pozn. autorky) selects who is the „butt" of the joke. The information in the KR contains the names of groups or individuals with (humorous) stereotypes attached to each*" (Attardo 1994, 224).

Nevertheless, as noted in the article *Historia Docet* (*Mladé Slovensko*, 1932/1, issue 4, pp. 58-59), Milan Ivanka's participation in the special delegation to Norway was entirely justified:

> "*Dr. Milan Ivanka, a member of parliament, represented the Slovaks at the official celebrations of Bjørnson organized by the Norwegian government. Rightly so, as he defended before Hungarian courts the author of the Slovak translation of B. Bjørnson's* Truths for the Hungarians*: Vladimír Hurban. Even under oppression, Dr. Ivanka had the courage to defend the Slovak cause. But here one must ask: where was the courage of the vast majority of those who today consider themselves defenders of Slovakia?*"

To understand the joke, it is necessary to be familiar with the situation on which it is based (the 1932 Bjørnson jubilee, Ivanka's positions, and the Norwegian connections): "Any joke must be 'about something' […]. The situation of a joke can be thought of as the 'props' of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. Any joke must have some situation, although some jokes will rely more on it, while others will almost entirely ignore it" (Attardo, 1994: 225). In my view, the situation also includes the specific medium, as well as not only the broader socio-political context but also the textual environment into which the joke is embedded – that is, the co-text of the joke. The variety of newspapers and magazines published during that period, their large circulation, and the diversity of topics they covered demonstrate that the press represented an important part of social and political life. According to Zdeněk Kárník, in 1930 there were about 1,800

periodicals published in Prague and more than 2,500 in the entire Czechoslovak Republic. He also notes that the press was practically the only mass medium at the time. Political parties, associations, and various social organizations therefore founded their own newspapers, and periodicals were created for specific readerships, women, children, and professional groups, in order to communicate their views and positions to the public (Kárník. 2008: 204-205). The situation in Bratislava, which after 1918 became the capital of Slovakia within the new Czechoslovakia, reflected the nationwide development of the press. According to Štefan Timko (2021: 66), humorous periodicals in Slovakia began to develop, still within the former Austrian Monarchy, only after the end of Bach's absolutism (1849-1859/60), when civil and press freedoms were relaxed. In 1861, Viliam Pauliny-Tóth founded the first Slovak humorous magazine, *Černokňažník* (published until 1864 and again from 1876 to 1910). It was followed by other Slovak humorous periodicals such as *Ježibaba*, *Rarach* or *Rarášek*. These journals had a distinctly political character, the satirical form allowed them to criticize the ruling class more sharply than traditional political newspapers. Although they were subject to censorship, their publishers faced milder punishments and fines than those imposed for oppositional articles in political papers. As Timko (2021: 68) further observes, political humor was among the most popular themes of unofficial humor. Jokes about representatives of state power were a regular part of everyday communication, and caricatures of politicians gained great popularity during the First Czechoslovak Republic. After 1918, more than twenty humorous magazines were published in Slovakia, many of which also focused on political satire. The most prominent satirical periodical of this era was *Kocúr* (1919–1945), published by autonomists in Martin. Until the establishment of the Slovak State, it targeted politicians from all camps, but later it became a tool of anti-communist and anti-Semitic propaganda. *Osa* (1932–33), the magazine in which the joke was published, was a short-lived satirical periodical founded by Karol Sidor, a prominent representative of the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSĽS). Sidor's political stance was strongly pro-autonomist and critical of the centralist organization of Czechoslovakia. Similarly, the humorous magazine *Osa*, of which he was the publisher, promoted humor aligned with this orientation, that is, anti-Czechoslovak, anti-Czech, pro-autonomist, and anti-Semitic. As Cingerová and Dulebová (2022: 129-130) note in their work on *uštipačnosť* and Correctness in Slovak online humour, reflecting on this typical form of humor, "'uštipačnosť" in the sense of an action can be semantized as a more subtle sarcasm; it [...] only 'pinches,' 'stings' (teases), and despite being painful, it is a one-time, not life-threatening action." At the same time, which is also interesting when considering the periodical *Osa*, in

which the analyzed joke was published, they point out (2022: 130): "It is significant to note that such a conceptualization of humor is also reflected in the names of humorous magazines that were published in the Slovak space in the past – e.g., 'Jež' [Hedgehog] (from the 1920s), 'Osa' [Wasp] (from the 1930s), 'Sršeň' [Hornet] (from the 1940s), 'Šidlo' [Sewing awl] (from the 1940s)."

As for the logical mechanism in this particular joke, I believe it can be described as an absurd extrapolation. The inanimate statue "decides" to step down and confront the target of the joke in a certain way, to scold him; thus, two worlds come together in this depiction: „The logical mechanism is the parameter that accounts for the way in which two senses (scripts, isotopies,...) in the joke are brought together." (Attardo 1994, 225) We can refer to these worlds as scripts, understanding a script according to Attardo (1994: 198) as "[…] an organized chunk of information about something (in the broadest sense). It is a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker which provides the speaker with information on how things are done, organized, etc." As Attardo further notes (1994, 200), "[m]ost definitions of 'script' agree that it contains information which is typical, such as well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities."

In the case of script opposition here, we have Script 1: reverence for a national hero (Bjørnson), a static, elevated statue, a symbol of Norwegian culture, and Script 2: aggressive, active intervention, the statue comes to life and goes to "set things straight" with a specific person. Both of these scripts overlap, and the text serves to activate them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the joke from *Osa* (1932) illustrates how humor functions as both a narrative and ideological tool. Using Attardo's framework of six Knowledge Resources – Language, Narrative Strategy, Target, Situation, Logical Mechanism, and Script Opposition – the joke can be understood as a carefully structured hypothetical scenario in which the statue of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson "steps down" to confront Milan Ivanka.

The language and narrative strategy create a concise, pointed scenario, while the target identifies Ivanka as the subject of ridicule, enforcing social and ideological norms. The joke relies on an absurd extrapolation as its logical mechanism, merging two scripts: reverence for a national hero (the static Bjørnson statue as a symbol of Norwegian culture) and aggressive, active intervention (the statue coming to life to discipline Ivanka). This script op-

position, together with the socio-political situation – Slovakia under HSĽS (a conservative people's party) autonomy advocacy, centralist opposition, and the 1932 Bjørnson jubilee – makes the humor intelligible to the contemporary audience.

The symbolic appropriation of Bjørnson transforms the cultural monument into a political instrument, lending moral authority to the critique and reinforcing ideological conformity through laughter. Overall, the joke exemplifies how humor can operate as a mechanism, shaping audience perception, reinforcing social norms, and mobilizing cultural symbols for ideological purposes. Bjørnson is used as a tool of ideological appropriation: the illustration of his statue in motion and the accompanying text transfer a foreign cultural authority into the service of domestic political rhetoric. In the joke, Bjørnson, a Norwegian writer and symbol of national awakening, is presented as a fictional political actor who would "punish" Milan Ivanka for his perceived missteps. In fact, this assigns Bjørnson a political stance he never explicitly held – the satirical author draws him into Slovak internal political disputes.

Bjørnson is naturalized as a moral arbiter; within the joke, his "animation" transforms the polemic into an apparent moral certainty, giving the satire weight beyond a local insult. Known in Europe as an advocate for national rights, he serves as a "natural" ally to pro-autonomist rhetoric. Norwegian celebrations, originally apolitical from the perspective of Slovak affairs, are reinterpreted through the lens of the Czechoslovak political conflict. Together, these processes demonstrate how political humor, by presenting Bjørnson as a matter of political relevance, perceived not just as a historical figure but as a political entity, constructs and reinforces ideological boundaries through authoritative symbolism.

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