

## **Introduction**

The thesis describes main features of Czech and British humour, their similarities and differences, typical expressions of humour within those two nations. It also presents some well-known personalities that are connected with humour.

The aim of this thesis is to find out what the main features of both Czech and British humour are, to decide where a “division line“ between those two areas lies (and if there is any), to present how humour in Czech Republic and United Kingdom is used and what can be the obstacle in understanding. This work also presents some typical types of jokes, fictive and nonfictive persons that can be marked as representatives of Czech or British humour.

The thesis is divided into three thematic parts.

Main objective of the first part is to define what exactly the term “humour” means, where its roots lie, what the most important milestones are and what leads to the successful and the unsuccessful perception of humour.

Goal of the second part is to characterise both Czech and British humour. Afterwards, to point out what do they have in common and what do they differ in.

The last part contains a variety of joke types and patterns used in Czech Republic and in United Kingdom as well as both fictive and nonfictive characters (containing writers, playwrights, humourists and humorist groups, main characters).

The appendix at the end of my thesis includes pictures I used for description of things mentioned in the thesis.

# 1 The Humour Theory

## 1.1 What is Humour?

All over the human history, people used jokes, sarkasm and other branches of humour to express their feelings or to cheer somebody, but only a small community was trying to define the real meaning of this word. Philosophers, scientists, humorists or just ordinary inhabitants of our planet, all of them were studying laughter, silly things, human nature, succesful comedies, well-known jokes, looking for the simpliest and the most accurate answer. Many of these “humour theorists“ came up with their own suggestion or just improved some of already existing ones. And after almost three thousand years, there is a huge variety of possibilities how humour is defined, and many of those theories are really good, but no one really discovered the “Holy Grail“ of humour theories. If we look up the word humour in the encyclopedia Diderot (1999), we find out that the word humour has its origin in latin word *humores*, fluids (sap or juice) in human body that determine individual temperament (sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic). In Renaissance drama, humoral theory evolved, according to which actors should behave in accordance with their dominating humours. The term as we know it nowadays is used since 18<sup>th</sup> century. (Diderot, 1999) On the other hand, all those theories have at least one thing in common - the sense of humour. The sense of humour (or humor, the spelling differs, because of the unstressed ending *-our* in BrE turns into *-or* in NAmE) is an ability of a person of all ages, nationalities and cultures to express and experience humour, which means to laugh, smile, behave in a silly way etc. Humour also brings an enjoyment that satisfies our inner thirst for pleasure, causing laughter as a side effect. It is a basic sound, a physical reaction on changes in our feelings, similar to a sigh when we are unhappy or a snarl when we are angry. (L’Estrange, 2006)

## **1.2 The Main Humour Definitions**

In a research by Aaron Smuts from University of Wisconsin-Madison published on Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy webpage in 2006, it is mentioned that scholars and thinkers presented over 100 types of theories of humour. For example, there are 8 major theory types in Dr. Patricia Keith-Spiegel's classification – biological, superiority, incongruity, surprise, ambivalence, release, configuration, and psychoanalytic. Jim Lyttle, Ph. D. created the theory classification in a different way, depending on focus – functional (purpose of humour in life), stimuli (what makes things funny) and response (why is this or that funny). But due to many humour thesis and suggestions, we can differ 3 main theories – incongruity theory, superiority theory and relief theory. (Smuts, 2006)

### **1.2.1 Incongruity Theory**

Due to the Smuts' research, first and leading, the incongruity theory focuses on absurdity and incongruity of humour, which are often marked to be essential elements of humour. This theory also states that humour is understood immediately at the moment when the incongruity or absurdity occurs. Basics of this theory were stated for example in *Rhetoric* by Aristotle, or in works by René Descartes or Immanuel Kant.

### **1.2.2 Superiority Theory**

Second and very popular theory too is the superiority theory that states that someone is responsible for a moral violation, and the perceiver is not, then the conditions are met for having the feeling of superiority. (Veatch, 1998) In simple saying, the humour is created when we feel our supremacy over others through their misfortune. Superiority was described in Plato's or Aristotle's works and in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and *Human Nature*.

### **1.2.3 Relief Theory**

The third theory is often associated with Sigmund Freud, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist of Czech origin (Wikipedia (a), 2010) or with Herbert Spencer. Instead of defining the humour, this theory describes structures and psychological processes produced by laughter.

We can distinguish 2 versions of this theory. The strong version states that all joy and laughter is a result of an excessive energy and the weak version states that laughter involves a release of some psychologic tension. (Smuts, 2006)

### **1.3 History of Humour and Its Important Milestones**

In this part, I will focus on roots of the humour and its important milestones. Nobody knows when or where exactly the humour occurred first. We can only guess if a group of prehistoric people laughed at their fellow when he unluckily fell into a mammoth trap. But the first documented humorous works are the Ancient Greek comedies. As described in Aristotle's work *Poetics* (about 335 BC), which is claimed to be the first literary theory book of the human history, (Diderot, 1999) the origin of word comedy comes from Greek word *kómos*, an ancient dance and sing parade presented in honor of Dionysus, the god of grapes and wine, inspiring joyful worshipping, carnivals and celebrations (see appendix 1). (Wikipedia (c), 2010) Along with tragedies (from Greek word *tragoidia*, the he-goat-song, a performance based on human suffering (Diderot, 1999) ), comedies were part of Ancient Greek festivals. Comedy was, however, considered not to be as important as tragedy, therefore tragedies were performed for 3 festival days while comedies only for 1 day.

The birthplace of the comedy is the city of Athens, the capital and the largest city of Greece. The Athenian comedy is divided into three periods – Old Comedy, Middle Comedy and New Comedy.

#### **1.3.1 *Archàia* or Old Comedy**

Old Comedy of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC often made fun of a specific person (politicians, also philosophers, tragedy or music authors) and of current political issues. Every role is played exclusively by men (even female roles) and a choir has its important role too. There are about 40 dramatists taking part in Old Comedy period, such as Ferekratés, Eupolis or Kratínos (Wikipedia (e), 2010), but the most important one was Aristophanes (about 446 – 386 BC, see appendix 2), also known as the Prince of Ancient Comedy (Cobham Brewer, 2004).

Aristophanes wrote over 40 plays, e.g. *The Knights* (424 BC), *The Clouds* (423 BC) or *Lysistrata* (411 BC). (Wikipedia (d), 2010)

### **1.3.2 *Mese* or Middle Comedy**

In 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, Middle Comedy made fun of more general themes such as professions (like cook, courtesans or soldiers), literature and society in general. Obscenity disappears from the performances, as well as the role of the choir is moved to the background, not influencing the plot anymore and filling pauses instead. Aristophanes, apart from Old Comedy, is sometimes claimed as one of the early Middle Comedy author (because of his work *Plutus*, where both the wealth and the poverty in Athens are criticised), but we can name other authors such as Antiphanes, Aegaeus, Araros (a son of Aristophanes) or Alexis. (Wikipedia (e), 2010)

### **1.3.3 *Nea* or New Comedy**

In this period, original connection of the comedy and Dionysos and his celebrations disappears and the theme of an everyday life dominates instead (a love with its obstacles, money or *senes iratus* – angry old man). As in Middle Comedy professions were the prevailing roles, in New Comedy these are mostly family-connected roles, eg. a strict father, a son in love, a quarrelsome wife or a witty slave. Most important author of this period is undoubtedly Menander (the Prince of New Comedy (Cobham Brewer, 2004) ) who was not so popular in ancient Greece, on the other hand, he was very popular in ancient Rome, followed by many authors (Plautus). Some of them even “borrowed” his paragraphs and passages, often with a whole plot. (Diderot, 1999)

### **1.3.4 The Influence of Ancient Comedy**

The Ancient Comedy, being the first humorous work ever, certainly influenced all authors after this period. For example, pamphlets and political critics by Voltaire or Jonathan Swift were camouflaged as a buffoonery in the same way as Old Comedy authors did. Political satires are actual even nowadays in books, movies and TV series (e.g. *Dr. Strangelove* by Stanley Cubrick, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* or *The Young Ones*) or advertisement (negative ads during Czech election period). New Comedy and the theme of strict and moody parents and their beloved

children inspired many and many screenwriters, creating sitcoms like *American Complete Savages* or *Czech Comeback*. (Wikipedia (e), 2010)

Now, I will follow the personal communication of Jarmila Valeriánová (2006) I used in my lessons of literature when attending the secondary grammar school, and I will skip more than one thousand years and head right into the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the biggest evolution of the humour started. In that time, bawdies, farces and satires of Roman and Greek literature were still very popular and when one of the most important literary writing in the human history was created. As you probably guess, the book is the masterpiece by Dante Alighieri (see appendix 3) initially called *La Commedia*, known now as *La Divina Commedia* or the Divine Comedy. The word *Divinia*/Divine was later added by Giovanni Boccaccio and has nothing in common with God, but it was meant as “great” or “fantastic”. Moreover, most of the book is not humorous at all (except the part called *The Inferno*, where damned human souls behave bawdily and enjoy the obscene word play), but it is an allegory of the Christian afterlife and the soul’s journey to the God. A story contrasting *Paradiso* (Paradise) with *Purgatorio* (Purgatory) and *Inferno* (Hell) was called a comedy because it is a story about a difference between the powerful and the powerless and about pitfalls and perils of living in society. Therefore, it is a comedy in the antique sense of the word.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century was indeed very productive period. Apart from already mentioned Divine Comedy, another two essential pieces of literature were made. First one, *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (see appendix 4), an Italian poet and writer, is a collection of one hundred novelas, consecutively told by seven girls and three boys that left Florence because of the Black Death (the bubonic plague). Apart from stories of love, sad life events and others, this work contains ironical critique of Italian society and manners of that time.

This book also has the major influence on Geoffrey Chaucer (see appendix 5) when writing his *Canterbury Tales* (he and his works, like *The House of Fame*, were also inspired by Dante Alighieri or Francesco Petrarca). This collection of 23 verse tales told by pilgrims when travelling to the shrine at Canterbury describes in a humorous way a life in medieval England. Furthermore, some of the stories, like *The Miller’s Tale*, are still funny according to today’s standarts.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were at least three writers, whose works were very important for the evolution of humour. The first one was a French writer, lawyer and doctor François Rabelais, the author of *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (*The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*),

a series of five books about two giants, Gargantua and his son Pantagruel (it is a paradox that their size is not specified, they can fit into ordinary house in one story and in another one whole civilizations can fit into their mouths). This work is a parody of medieval knight novels, satirically criticizing the Roman Catholic Church, school and law systems. Among all those satires, bawdy stories and scatological humour (or toiled humour), it is also claimed to be the one of the first fantasy books in the history.

The second one, a Spanish novelist, poet and playwright Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, is the man who created the unforgettable story about “a knight who fight the windmills“. You now may guess the novel is called *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* (The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha, see appendix 6). This novel draws all the virtues that every knight has and difference between the real and the imaginary world in a very humorous style. Having been translated into unbelievable 85 languages, this piece of literature became the second most translated work of all times, right after the Holy Bible.

The last author of humour of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and probably the most famous writer ever, as stated Chudý and Chudá in their book *Some basic facts about the English speaking countries* (1997), is William Shakespeare. His plays are sometimes divided into Comedies, Tragedies and Historical plays. In that time, the difference between tragedies and comedies was very much the same as in plays written in ancient Greek times – comedies have happy endings and flawed heroes, while the endings in tragedies are sad and heroes are, well, brave and flawless, but dead. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s comedies (such as *All’s well That Ends Well* or *As You Like It*) are a bit different than the Greek ones. Instead of satires and bawdy humour, their charm lies in word play – puns, double meanings (also called double-entendres) or allusions. That sometimes makes them hard-to-follow nowadays. Not only did Shakespeare use comic characters in his comedies, but also in his historical plays, for example Falstaff, a humorous person in Henry IV. Comic figures are also included in his tragedies, but their purpose is not to provide a laughter, but to comment events on the stage in a satirical and funny way. (Chudý, Chudá, 1997)

After another two centuries, the 18<sup>th</sup> century created a new type of humorous form – (a) wit. Wit is an intellectual type of humour and a wit is usually a person who can make quick ironic and witty comments during the conversation. Wit can be expressed for example as a quip, a short saying or comment of sarcastic nature, or repartee, a quick answer or feedback. (Wikipedia (f), 2010) There are many literary authors that can be characterised as wits, for example Voltaire, famous for his wit (that become a fashion in France), John Wilkes, British radical and journalist, or Jonathan Swift. His famous book *Gulliver’s Travels*

(where sailor Lemuel Gulliver, main protagonist of the book, recounts his visits to strange hidden lands inhabited by strange beings, see appendix 7) contains a chapter, where Lemuel visits a land where not human, but horses are the dominant species keeping Yahoos (local barbaric humans) as beasts. The whole novel is a witty reflection of civilization failings. But this book is not the only one with Swift's witty ideas and comments. In *A Modest Proposal* he writes about problems of starvation and overpopulation, suggesting the solution of eating own children.

I also want to mention one author of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who was born in Ukraine and was a remarkable dramatist and humourist. The man I am writing about now is Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol. In his short story *The Nose* (that is very bizzare I must admit), a nose of a clerk from St. Petersburg leaves his face and walks around the city causing trouble and developing its own life. This story was also film adapted by Alexandre Alexandrovitch Alexeieff using his own invention – the pinscreen animation, and can be viewed for example on Youtube. (Wikipedia (g), 2010) But some of the other Gogol's short stories are written in so horrible and dark style that, although the story probably is very funny, a reader is loathe to laugh. Great example of this can be his short story *The Overcoat*, where a poor clerk almost starves to death because he wants to buy a new overcoat. When he earns enough money, he buys it and it is stolen from him the very same day.

There are another 2 writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that are worth mentioning. The first one is an American author and humourist Samuel Langhorne Clemens, also known as Mark Twain. He wrote many vernacular novels with typical eccentric characters, for example *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (that are mostly autobiographical). Although the story set in American South is told by twelve-year-old boy, it contains a lot of negative views of human society and life in general. The second one, Oscar Wilde, was, among others, a great comic playwright, whose only joke was to contrast the honesty of the world with lazy selfishness of its inhabitants.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century raised crowds of great writers and humourist authors and I will present just 2 of them, both being my favourite ones. Eric Arthur Blair, English author and journalist, known by his pen name George Orwell, wrote a beautiful satirical allegory on Soviet Union and its political and social issues, such as Russian revolution, called *Animal Farm* (the original title was *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*, see appendix 8). The second author is remarked as an amazing science-fiction and popular fiction writer, but he also did publish two books of jokes – *Isaac Asimov's Treasury of Humor* and *Asimov Laughs Again: More than 700 Jokes, Limericks, and Anecdotes*, both containing comments on why jokes are funny, and also some suggestions on how to become a good joketeller. Isaac Asimov also wrote a short story *Jokester*, where the main protagonist is searching for the answer to questions “Where do jokes come



from?” and “What makes them (jokes) so funny?” The origin of jokes is the main theme of the book, since people are saying “I heard a good joke!“, but no one actually says “I have invented a good one!“ (Valeriánová, 2006)

This century also opened the door for spreading arts and ideas (and humour, of course) all over the world by one particular invention. And the invention was the television. Early programmes introduced humorous shows like *Saturday Night Live* or *Monthy Python's Flying Circus*. However, first humorous performances did not come with TV, but few years earlier, with the invention of motion picture and silent film. And this is connected with one particular man and probably the most famous actor in the history – Charlie Chaplin (see appendix 9) .He was ranked as 10<sup>th</sup> greatest male screen legend of all time by American Film Institute in 1999. (AFI, 1999) In a review of book *Chaplin: A Life* by Stephen M. Weissman, Martin Sieff from Washington Times wrote about Chaplin: "Chaplin was not just 'big', he was gigantic. In 1915, he burst onto a war-torn world bringing it the gift of comedy, laughter and relief while it was tearing itself apart through the First World War. Over the next 25 years, through the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler, he stayed on the job. It is doubtful any individual has ever given more entertainment, pleasure and relief to so many human beings when they needed it the most." (Sieff, 2008) But he was not the only actor of those times, let me mention duet Laurel & Hardy or Buster Keaton. In Czech Republic, humorous motion pictures and theatre were also popular. For example, funny performances by Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich in their theatre called Divadlo Voskovce a Wericha or in black-and-white television shows were and still are very popular, mainly because of their satirical critique and parodies of World War II and the society of that time. (Supraphon (a), 2010)

## **1.4 How to Get It**

In the last part of the theory section, I want to describe what helps to successfully understand (and what helps to fail) some humorous thing such as joke, irony, parody or any other form of humour. In my opinion, there are 3 main parts of the understanding process.

### 1.4.1 Part One – The Language

As you may guess, the language is very important for understanding the joke. If you don't speak the language of the joke-teller, you will surely not understand it. When you actually can speak the same language, you are only on the half way to win, because the language and the translation alone does not mean everything. This is mainly the problem of language learners – they do understand words, they do understand phrases, even whole sentences, but when told a joke, they do not get it. The problem is that one thing can have two meanings in one language or one thing can have one meaning in language of the joke-teller and a totally different meaning in the language of the listener/language learner. As an example I will present a riddle joke about comparing Windows, a computer operation system created by Microsoft Corporation, to an apple. The Czech original of the joke is this: *“Jaký je rozdíl mezi jablkem a Windows? Jablka padají jen na podzim.”* The literal translation of this joke will look like this: *“What is the difference between Windows and an apple? Apples fall only in autumn.”* As you can see, there is nothing humorous (except the dumb translation of the joke, of course) in the translation. The origin of the joke is based on the word *padat*, which means the falling of apples in autumn. In Czech language, it also means the same as the word crash when talking about a crashing of operation system. If we change the word *fall* to word *crash*, then the translation is correct, but the sense of the whole joke disappears, as it is based on two meanings of the same word.

This problem can be demonstrated on two popular British series – *Mr. Bean* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. They are both well-known all over the world, but the first one is totally understood by anyone. Are you asking why? Simply because there are almost no words. It is similar to first slapstick movies, where all the humour is expressed by the action on the screen, completely without any oral commentary. Therefore it is understood in United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Russia, Italy, Egypt or Vietnam. The second one is beloved too, but some jokes in MPFC are hard to translate.

### 1.4.2 Part Two – The Background Knowledge

We can come across the problem that we do speak the same language as the joke-teller, but we still do not understand. I can provide some examples. The first one was told by one of my friends, who returned from United Kingdom after spending 3 years there working in London. It is another riddle joke, but based on background knowledge and it sound like this: *“What is the difference between Polish worker in London and E.T.? E.T. can speak English and wants to go*

*home*“ I want to say E.T. or the Extra-Terrestrial, is a film by Steven Spielberg from 1982 about an alien that wrecks on Earth and wants to return home. Therefore, a listener of this joke is unable to understand it if he does not know there are lots of Polish immigrants in London, they still come but rarely do they leave and that they are working there even they are not speaking English at all.

The background knowledge is essential in so-called profession jokes – they are related to some profession, e.g. a teacher, a physicist, a driver, etc. For example, a classical profession joke that was created by Zdeněk Svěrák and Ladislav Smoljak (and originally created by their fictional genius Jára Cimrman) sounds simply like this: “ $H_2SO_5$ .” An ordinary reader or listener of this joke will absolutely not understand it, and only a few people in the audience in the theater during the play by Smoljak, Cimrman and Svěrák actually laughed. The wit lies in the knowledge of chemical elements in general, and sulfur in particular. Sulphur, as every chemist surely know, has 6 valence electrons (electrons of an atom that are responsible for reactions and combining with other atoms), 2 of them are spend for bonding with Hydrogen and only 4 left for bonding with Oxygen. Accordingly, the number 5 at Oxygen is nonsense and ridiculous. But the fact the joke was invented on the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (according to Z. Svěrák and L. Smoljak) and, as many of us learned during chemistry lessons at high school,  $H_2SO_5$  can be synthetically prepared in laboratory, ruins the whole joke.

### **1.4.3 Part Three – The Human**

Assume now we are native speakers and we have proper background knowledge. We listen to a joke and, finally, we still do not get it. Here comes the question: “Why?” The problem lies in ourselves. We can have all the preconditions for being perfect and still we are not. As there does not exist any universal definition of humour, as I have already written before, there is absolutely no universal formula for understanding all jokes in the world. The sense of humour is unique for every person on the planet in the same way as fingerprints are. Therefore some people can identify one particular joke very funny, and some people find it boring and not humorous at all.

## 2 Czech and British Humour

In the second part of my thesis I will characterize both Czech and British humour, their typical features and hallmarks. I will also compare these two humour fields and describe what features do they share and what features are unique for them. I want to remark that all features are described from my point of view formed by reading books, humorous stories and comic strips, by watching films, TV series, theater plays and sketches and listening to audio records and native speakers of both countries.

### 2.1 Czech Humour

First of all, I want to say that my country was formed by many territorial and political changes through its history and therefore there is nothing like unique and unaffected Czech humour. Forming of Czech humour as we can encounter it nowadays was influenced by eastern culture, mainly Russian and Slavic culture, because the country was part of Socialist Europe for about a half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by western culture and habits, partly because of both World Wars and partly because of the trend of an American way of living that can be seen now in the beginning of the 21<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 2.1.1 Brief History of Czech Humour

Again, I will use some pieces of information from Valeriánová's personal communication. In Czech literature, the humour first occurred probably in *Chronica Boëmorum* (Chronicle of Bohemians, created in 1119-1125 AD) by Cosmas of Prague, where we can find two anecdotes. During the reign of Charles IV., drama was evolving and often contained some humorous features, e.g. *Mastičkář* (Quack), a satirical farce written in verses contesting about quackery and healing in Prague during the Middle Ages, or *Podkoní a Žák* (Groom and Scholar) describing a quarrel between a groom and a scholar about which one of them has better living. In Hussite times a satire occurs in their war songs to motivate ally soldiers and scare the enemy. During the national awakening, many authors try to form humorous pieces of literature. Probably the first theory of humour and satire was formed by Josef Jungman in his work

*Slovesnost*. In the era of romanticism, Karel Havlíček Borovský created many political satires, for example *Tyrolské Elegie* (Tyrolean Elegies), where elegies, laments in form of irony or mockery, are used to criticise Austrian government, the church and Baron Alexander von Bach, or *Král Lávra* (King Lávra), a poem inspired by an Irish myth, tells a story about a king who had his hair cut and shaved only once in a year and everytime he let his barber execute, because he has donkey ears. (Borovský, 2010) In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jan Neruda created a *fejeton* (can be translated as an essay or a sketch). It is a newspaper essay dealing with up-to-date themes in a humorous and interesting way. In the same time, Svatopluk Čech, mainly known for his stories about Czech citizen Matěj Brouček, where Čech criticises political and social problems and citizenship, created a satire called *Hanuman*, where he describes a country of apes, a ridiculous alegory on the political system of Austria-Hungary. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Czech humour was still growing, and grown many great authors such as Karel Poláček and his *Bylo nás Pět*, Karel Čapek (Czech writer, who invented the word “robot” and made it so popular and common) with his detective sotries *Povídky z Jedné a Druhé Kapsy*, Bohumil Hrabal, using black humour and satire in his works, such as *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* or *Postřižiny*, or Jaroslav Hašek and his *Dobrý voják Švejk* (The Good Soldier Švejk). (Valeriánová, 2006)

### 2.1.2 It Is Political

As I explained in chapter 2.1.1, Czech humour was influenced by political actions. This led to the fact that for many years Czech humourists were making fun of political establishments (for example comunism, socialism, fascism or even democracy), political figures such as presidents, top politicians or people influenced by politics, or habits and things that were common and normal in those old and weird times. A great example of Socialist influence on our country is *Radio Yerevan* (sometimes also called the Armenian radio, because Yerevan is the capital and the largest city of Armenia), the fictional soviet radio whose fragments of broadcasts, mainly composed as a Question and Answer jokes, were very popular in all Comunist countries (excluding the political center in Moscow) in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some people even collected those jokes, wrote them in their diaries and when found nowadays, they are very, very hilarious and some of them are very rare and unheard before. A great paragon can be this one: *Question on Radio Yerevan: "Is it true that in Yerevan, we grow corn like telegraph poles?" And the answer of the radio is: "Yes that is true. And sometimes even in a bigger density."* The phenomenon of Radio Yerevan

was so popular that in 90s Zuzana Bubílková and Miloslav Šimek (famous humourist, comedian and partner of Jiří Grossmann – pair Šimek & Grossmann was famous since 60s for their humour) adapted it and created a satirical TV show called *S politiky netančím*. Political humour also became a dangerous weapon in a state war called the elections. Used in so-called negative advertisement it ridiculed politicians and their political program and was probably stronger than any election TV spot or political promises to citizens of Czech Republic.

### **2.1.3 It Is Vulgar**

When browsing through present-day humorous TV programmes and jokes, I must describe the Czech humour as vulgar. There is no TV show or told joke without at least small vulgar word. Many jokes, mainly told among younglings are build up on vulgarisms, using them even in everyday talking as something funny, hilarious, making their speech more effective and more important. The problem is that trends and popular culture appreciated by teens are different than among adults – they grew up on humour that was, partly because of the fact that before some 20 years ago ethic and morale codes do not contained vulgarisms, marking them as “strictly forbidden”. On contrary, the freedom of speech nowadays also transformed “strictly forbidden“ to “shocking, but allowed“. The truth is the humour can be easily made completely without vulgarisms, as Voskovec & Werich or Jaroslav Hašek did.. Spicy word is not an obstacle when used cleverly, e.g. in a Czech movie *Dědictví aneb Kurvahošigutntag* with Boleslav Polívka as the main protagonist, we can find lots of rude words. But their purpose is a little bit different. This movie was created a few years after Velvet Revolution, when the freedom of speech was celebrated and fully used, and therefore a plot about Moravian redneck with all those great Moravian character attributes such as a language full of vulgarities, alcohol drinking, rudeness and disrespect became legendary almost overnight.

Hand in hand with vulgarity goes scatological (or toilet) humour. It is dealing with burping, vomiting, urination, flatulation, defecation (and other body functions, if there are any). Sounds and functions of a human body start to attract our attention with our first steps. Kids often find them funny and this prevails towards the puberty, and sometimes even after that. The point is that many jokes are based on those sounds and functions, but their function can be marked as “time/killing”.

#### 2.1.4 It Is Simple

Call it primitive, dumb, easily-understandable or unintelligent, we must face the fact that the Czech humour is really easy-to-follow. Wherever you deal with it, humorous figures are obvious, natural and you do not need to think too much to catch them. That does not mean that Czech people are not clever or slow. I just personally feel that everyone rather likes short, quick and simple joke than something deeper and more thought over.

#### 2.1.5 It Is and It Is Not Original

We can come across a lot of humorous TV programmes, radio broadcasts or books, all of them created by Czech people. But is that still the original and uninfluenced Czech humour? Of course not. Talkshows like *Mr.GS* or *Uvolněte se, prosím* have experienced moderators/comedians (Michal Suchánek and Richard Genzer in the first case, Jan Kraus in the second one), but all those talkshows, even they are improved in any way, are still the same – they look the same, questions on guests are the same and the overall feeling is the same – we are watching the same every night. Not only the inhabitants of Czech Republic, but people all over the world, because those shows look the same everywhere – in Britain, in USA. And there the humour turns into the boredom. We can also compare for example *American Pie* series with Czech *Snowboardáci*, *Raftáci* or *Brak* (although the last one was a student film with many famous actors in minor roles) with the same result.

On the other hand, there is a lot of artists that can still come up with something new. For example, Divadlo Jára Cimrmana produced 15 plays, every play with its own thematical seminar, and every single play is the original. And if not original, then at least inventive. In a play called *Hospoda na mýtince*, a man called Svát'a Pulec (Tadpole) is asked whether an other man, a fellow of one of main protagonists, called Dr. Emil Žába (Frog) was not his father. And vice versa, in a play called *Afrika* Dr. Emil Žába is asked if Svát'a Pulec was not his son. Although the first play, *Akt*, was performed in 4.10.1967, the humour of Cimrman's ensemble remains very modern. For example it runs its own webpage at [www.cimrman.at](http://www.cimrman.at) (the Austrian domain refers to the fact that Jára Cimrman “was born” in Vienna) in a style of an old newspaper.

### **2.1.6 It Is Black**

Our humour can be sometimes very merciless, applying the superiority theory (chapter 1.2.2) to its outer limits. People are making fun of other people, things and events regardless the following impact. Cruel comments on taboos such as minorities, death or sexual orientation are very favoured.

### **2.1.7 It Is Funny**

Although the peaking period of Czech humour was at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>th</sup> century did not bring anything revolutionary, we still laugh in front of our televisions or in beds with some funny book. Not only science, sport or politics raise legends, but the humour does too. Therefore we go back to movies like *Slavnosti sněženek*, *Noc na Karlštejně*, *Marečku, podejte mi pero!* or *Rozpuštěný a vypuštěný*, they are our cultural and humour heritage, and despite the fact that they are old and we have seen them almost one hundred times, we still love them, and especially some famous scenes.

## **2.2 British Humour**

Now we have the other side of a coin. The term Czech humour is unknown in the world (probably except Švejk), but when you are almost anywhere on the planet and you mention British humour, anybody will surely react on you and provide his personal opinions towards it. Why it is so common term and why the British humour is so widely reknown? This is what I will reveal in this part.

### **2.2.1 Brief History of British Humour**

Again, as Valeriánová stated, humour firstly occurred on the area of current United Kingdom in times of Bede – his *Ecclesiastical History* contains a lot of weird stories, focusing on the conflict of Celtic and Roman Christianity. In the times of Anglo-Saxons, humour was connected with their way of entertainment – romping and noisy games. In those times,



rhymes and rhymed anti-Church satires. The modern comedy and humour came in times of Chaucer, when buffoonery and rude jokes became very popular. But most of the British history of humour was described in chapter 1.3, that is why we will proceed to searching what is the British humour like.

### **2.2.2 It Is Dry**

Dry is the word that comes to mind of many people, if you ask them how would they characterize the British humour. It means that every joke or funny comment is told like it is not funny at all. We can find tons of examples in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* or *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*. Dry humour is often connected with the term “deadpan“, meaning without any emotion (a pan is a slang term for a face). Buster Keaton, also known as Great Stone Face, became famous for his deadpan mien – in various situations his face remains unchanged. We can find some deadpan actors nowadays too, although a lot of them do not appear in humorous films or plays, for example the American actor Steven Segal, known as a good guy from many action movies.

### **2.2.3 It Is Absurd**

Nonsense and surreality comes hand in hand with humour. An event that happens absolutely illogically leaves the only possibility how to react – to laugh. There are 2 sitcoms that provide great examples of absurdity in humour. The first one, *Black Books*, is about a bookshop owner who hates books and people, and the second one, *Red Dwarf*, is about a dumb man, a hologram, a cat evolved into human and a robot lost in the space on an abandoned spaceship. The absurd humour also inspired many songwriters and musicians in their work, for instance. Syd Barret, singer and guitarist of *Pink Floyd*. (Wikipedia (h), 2010)

### **2.2.4 It Is Sophisticated**

When you look at various British humour authors and their works, you will probably find many simple and conspicuous jokes, but you will also find lots and lots of humorous creations that require more than a glimpse and immediate understanding. Those jokes are really clever and worked out very well that you may laugh when you come across them for the first time, but when you think them over or return to them some time later, you will roll on the floor

laughing. Great exemplar can be the pentalogy by Douglas Adams called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. When I was reading it, I was laughing. Then I watched the film with my friends and we were laughing from the beginning till the end. But when we were talking about it afterwards, we were crying laughing.

### **2.2.5 It Is Political**

The British humour shows a disrespect to any political, religious or social authorities and to the class system. In already mentioned *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, an engineer explains to Arthur Dent, the main figure of this book, why the building company must build a highway just through his house, while the purpose of it is obviously meaningless. Any quality of the British humour can be identified in skits of Monty Python. For example, the disrespect to religion and religious authorities can be identified in their famous sketch with Spanish Inquisitors. And a parody of British decent behaviour, specifically the British walking style, which is claimed to be one of the most complex walking styles in the world, is the sketch called *The Ministry of Silly Walks*.

### **2.2.6 It Is Funny**

Many people find British humour boring and not interesting at all, but if this is true, why is it so popular then? As I have already written in chapter 1.4.3, the sense of humour is unpredictable. And because of that, the British humour is reputable and highly valued all over the world and making its performers, such as Rowan Atkinson, Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle and other guys from Monty Python or actors of Red Dwarf TV series, famous.

## **2.3 What Do Czech and British Humour Differ In?**

The first difference between those humours is their fame in the world. It is given partly because Czech Republic is only a small state in central Europe that was known as a part of communist Europe some 20 years ago, whilst United Kingdom,

the head state of Commonwealth of Nations, began to spread its influence in late 16<sup>th</sup> century as the British Empire to colonies and dominions. (Luscombe, 2010) The difference of their reputations is also caused by the language of both humours – English is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most used language in the world (1<sup>st</sup> is Chinese, 2<sup>nd</sup> is Spanish), and because of this fact British humour can be understood and enjoyed by far more people than Czech humour. (Lewis, 2009)

Another thing that is different is the style in which are both humours presented. In chapters 2.1.4 and 2.2.4 I described Czech humour as striking, because one do not need to search for the humorous feature and the funny fact is obvious. By contrast, British humour is hidden behind the surroundings, in Czech language we call it “sauce“, meaning something that is around something important. This also includes the form of the humour – Czech humour is often very simple, sometimes even very primitive, while British Humour is very subtle and deeply thought-out, and to understand you must search for its essence, what is suprisingly not boring, but very inspirative and enjoyable.

Dryness of British humour is something incomparable and it differs a lot from Czech humour. Here in Czech Republic, everything is meant exactly how it is presented – a joke as a joke and a seriousness as a seriousness. But the “deadpan” effect known from many British comedies presents hilarious things as they are in dead earnest.

Czech humour has its unique feature too. In times when Czech Republic was under the communist rule, a freedom of the speech was only a term known from dictionaries and there was a lack of good spirit and no one dared to create something humorous, we created a fictional humourist, writer, scientist, inventor and genius Jára da Cimrman. Despite the fact that he became famous almost instantly, his humour was still censored and carefully controled.

## **2.4 What Do Czech And British Humour Have In Common?**

As you may now guess, both Czech and British humour are dealing disrespectfully with authorities of any kind – politicians, religious representatives or social representatives. Jokes made on the account of heads of the state or the Church are popular. And even the British Queen is the most respected and most beloved person in the whole Commonwealth, this does not mean that nobody dares to make fun of her.

Both humours are also dealing with everyday problems and troubles of ordinary people. Articles in various tabloids just cannot be taken seriously, but only as a parody on the real life. In the television age we can face many soap-operas and serials that are not necessarily boring, but often bring a lot of humorous views on living, working or family and social relationships.

Another thing that is common for them is the black humour, toiled humour and smut. We can find them in both Czech and British way of amusement, sometimes they are very cruel, rude and inappropriate, for example jokes made of latest natural disasters, and televisions, publishers and all the authorities want to cross them out, all those f-words, s-words (in English) and k-words, p-words (in Czech) occurred some twenty or thirty years ago, they still occur and will accompany the humour after another twenty or thirty years. It does not matter if you are adult or child and agree with their usage or not – when used, you are still laughing. And I can bet that people will do so even after 50 years.

Stereotypes, such as blonde girls, police officers (to be politically correct), minorities, sexual orientation or physically or psychically challenged people – all of them are very often the theme of various jokes or comments. There are still a few differences, e.g. by minorities we often mean romanes here in Czech Republic, but in Britain they are mainly Irish or Polish people. On the other hand, the prejudice of dumb policemen, blondies that can't drive or back a car properly or the accent typical for homosexual men are completely the same here and in United Kingdom (and sometimes all over the world). There is also a similarity in patterns used in jokes and I describe all of this in chapter 3.1.

Finally, both Czech and British humour, despite the fact that their roots lie many centuries in the history, they are quite modern. They are still evolving and adapting to modern trends and opinions. For example, sitcoms and books covering modern computer themes (like the British sitcom *The IT Crowd*) became very popular recently, and various jokes using computer language spring up every day. I heard a good one recently: *A son comes to his dad and asks him: "Daddy, do you think that spending a lot of time in front of a computer and chatting on the Internet can have some negative influences on one's vocabulary?" And his father replies: "IMHO LOL."*

### 3 Czech and British Joke Patterns and Humour Legends

In the third part of my thesis I will focus on the most important part of the humour – its creators and performers. It also describes some common joke types and patterns that Czech and British humour have.

#### 3.1 Shared Humour Patterns

As you have already read in the chapter 2.4, Czech and British humour are not so different though and they really do share many features of humour, but actually it is not the end of the list. If we look at some popular jokes in Czech Republic and United Kingdom, we can find out that they both follow several patterns that are modified over and over to build more and more jests. If you want to find more of these jokes, just ask a friend for some or search the Internet, there is a plenty of them.

##### 3.1.1 One Man, The Other Man And The Unlucky One

This joke pattern is one of the more frequent ones in both countries, describing adventures of those three guys and, as you probably guess, all bad things always happen to the last one. There exist also a variant of 4 people, but with the same result. In Britain it traditionally begins as *An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman...*(or Welshman or Frenchman or German). In our country, we use the same pattern – *A Czech, a Russian and an American...*, where surprisingly the worst things happen to our countryman. I want to provide a British example I have found on the Will and Guy's Funny Clean Jokes webpage and it goes like this: *An Englishman, an Welshman and an Irishman were at the fair and about to go on the helter-skelter when an old witch steps in front of them. "This is a magic ride," she says. "you will land in whatever you shout out on the way down." "I'm game for this," says Dai, the Welshman, and slides down shouting "GOLD!" at the top of his voice. Sure enough, when he hit the bottom he found himself surrounded by thousands of pounds worth of gold coins. William, the Englishman, goes next and shouts "SILVER!" at the top of his voice.*

*At the bottom, he lands in more silver coinage than he can carry. Patrick, the Irishman, goes last and, launching himself from the top of the slide shouts "WEEEEEE!"* (Baker & Thomas, 2010)

### **3.1.2 Bars & Bartenders**

Another popular pattern is about bars and bartenders. A pub is a great place for meeting people and friends and having fun, therefore the humour does not stay only inside, but moves over and transforms to jokes about life inside these inns. The pattern often begins with the event when a customer (sometimes he is already drunk) enters a restaurant and asks the bartender for some service. In Czech Republic, there is one particular joke that is fairly well-known: *A customer enters a bar and starts to order one beer after another. When it is obvious that he is as drunk as a fiddler, the bartender asks him to pay on his account. Then the customer asks: "Do you accept pearls instead of coins?" "Sure I do," replies the bartender. "Alright then, give me three kilogrammes of oysters and wish me good luck."*

### **3.1.3 A Little Boy**

Jokes about Little Johnny (in Britain) or Pepíček (in Czech Republic) are quite popular, and every inhabitant of these countries can tell you at least two or three. This little boy is often very curious and ask nosy questions (and those with some sexual context are popular even more). We can find some great examples even on Wikipedia: *The teacher asks everyone in the class to demonstrate something exciting. When Johnny's turn came, he walked to the blackboard and drew a small dot. "What's that?" the teacher asked, puzzled. "It's a period." – "Well, I see that, but what's exciting about a period?" – "Darned if I know, but this morning my sister said she missed one. Dad had a heart attack, mom fainted, and the guy next door shot himself."* (Wikipedia (i), 2010)

### **3.1.4 Pranks – The Practical Jokes**

Practical jokes, "evil" tricks played on a person confusing and insulting him/her, are very popular in many countries, and not only among children (the popularity all over the world is proved for example by a book by H. Allen Smith, an American humourist, the author of *The Compleat Practical Joker*, a 320-page book full of various practical

jokes (Goodreads, 2010)). We can witness many pranks mainly in theater plays and, of course, during All Fool's Day on April 1.

### **3.1.5 Stereotype Jokes**

I have already mention them on page 20, and we are going to look at them in detail. A simple definition of *stereotype* is that it is used to describe all people of a certain belief into a mostly negative category. For example, all Jews are greedy, british people are all snobs and have bad teeth, the Irish are drunks and potato-eaters, all Arabs are angry people that like to blow things up, all women are bad drivers or all police officers are dumb. (Urbandictionary.com, 2010) Some of those false characteristics are so phony and ironical themselves that they can be used as jokes instead (see appendix 10 and 11). For example, *French people suck at war.*, *Canadians say "eh" instead of "huh"*, or *Moravian vinters distinguish 2 types of wine – a good wine and a good-for-Prague wine.*

## **3.2 Czech Humour Legends**

In this chapter I will present some personalities that make Czech humour so unique. They are not of course the only legends – to sum up all of them it will take years of research, reading and writing.

### **3.2.1 Jára Cimrman**

I have already written some facts about this fictional character on previous pages, but the whole story begun before 44 years. In 1966, Zdeněk Svěrák, Ladislav Smoljak and Miloň Čepelka meet and decided to establish a humouristic theatre. Few months later, they announced a discovery of Jára Cimrman's coffer with his inheritance. In a year they firstly presented a play named *Akt* in Malostranská Beseda, and then *Vyšetřování Ztráty Třídni Knihy*. Every consequent year until 1975 they presented one play. Since 1975, those plays undergo a big text modifications because of inappropriate humour scenes, and because of that many former members of the theater left (Jiří Menzel or Josef Koutelka). But also many people join the ensemble –

mostly non-actors from the backstage (Jan Hraběta, Václav Kotek or Jan Kašpar). After these 44 years, the theatre has 15 plays, 3 movies and many assistances on other humorous theatre plays, films or documentaries.

But who is mysterious Jára Cimrman? His origination is described on Cimrmanův Zpravodaj webpage (2010). He was born in Vienna in 1856, 1864, 1868, 1883 or 1884. This misunderstanding is given by the handwrite of a registrar in Vienna, because he was drunk in the time of the entry. His parents were Czech tailor Leopold and Austrian actress Marlen. Even now some people argue about his true origin – whether he was Czech or Austrian. Cimrman himself said a short time before his death: *“I would like to visit my motherland Böhmen once more.”* Since he was four years old, he started to work on fields of music, detective practices, science, theatre or arts, becoming (one of) the most influential person(s) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, he helped Gustave Eiffel with the design of his tower when living in Paris, he established a school of music, ballet and criminality, he also had a huge personal correspondence with George Bernard Shaw, but the Irish author had never replied to his letters. It is a pity that there is almost no visual record of Cimrman’s face - the word “almost“ indicate many photographies with groups of people, where it is certain Cimrman is present (some of those photos are even so accurate that there are marked rows where it is absolutely certain Cimrman is not present, see appendix 12 and 13). (Cimrmanův Zpravodaj, 2010)

The fictional character Svěrák and Smoljak created is very popular in Czech Republic, and despite the fact that it is absolutely obvious he is unreal, there are many society clubs revealing another works by Cimrman, museums of his inventions or tourist spots all over the country (and some of them are abroad too), where the genius worked, wrote a play or just rested on his journeys.

After the death of Ladislav Smoljak few days ago, the fate of the theatre was unclear, but now, after some changes in ensemble, they continue to perform all the plays, but it is highly possible that no other work of Cimrman will occur.

Humour of DJC is sometimes compared with The Pythons, sharing the same figures how to make fun of everything and their versatility in making theatre plays or movies.

### **3.2.2 Dobrý Voják Švejk**

The uncompleted humorous novel (four volumes of six planned) by Jaroslav Hašek called *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka*, illustrated by Josef Lada (see appendix 14), famous Czech painter



and writer, is another unique work that made Czech humour what it is now. A story about a simple-minded voluntary soldier is not only a humorous, but it is originally written as a satirical view on Austria-Hungary and its political and militant system. Hašek planned it in 1911, and completed the first volume in 1914 when the assassination in Sarajevo initiated World War I. And with these very same words the first book begins: “*Tak nám zabili Ferdinanda...*” (Hašek, 1923)

The person of Josef Švejk is sometimes compared with the nature of Czech people and in USA he is called “the European Forrest Gump”. He is extremely obedient and antimilitaristic, unmerciful to all army authorities and criticising absurdities of war and oppression of the Czech nation. But his simple-mindedness and good heart is only delusive. In fact, he exactly knows how to destroy the authority from inside only by being himself. Many people started to share his ideology, because of both World Wars and the influence of Nazism and because of the Communist supremacy in our country, being very popular even nowadays. (Blahoš, 2001)

The popularity of the book is proved by its many theatre and film adaptations and it has been translated into 54 languages. In Czech Republic, it became very popular when read by Jan Werich or played by Rudolf Hrušínský (see appendix 15).

### **3.2.3 Voskovec & Werich**

Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (see appendix 16) performed many humorous plays full of music (played by Jaroslav Ježek). Acting in Osvobozené divadlo (Prague Free Theatre), this Czech avant-garde theatre was inspired by Dadaism and Futurism and plays by Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau or Vítězslav Nezval were performed. (Wikipedia (j), 2010) Works of V+W, as they were commonly introduced, were inspired by improvisation on stage, parody and plays about social (e.g. unemployment) and political problems, followed by anti-fascist themes. Their first play, *Vest pocket revue*, was very popular and in style it was similar to slapstick comedies. Since the year of 1932 when they performed *Ceasar*, comparing Adlof Hitler to a man who is anxious for war, Osvobozené divadlo was claimed to be political, and their most famous play called *Balada z hadrů* was strictly anti-fascist.

Humour of V+W is very similar to Hašek’s Švejk by its political involvement. Now you maybe understand why I called Czech humour political (in the chapter 2.1.2) and how it has been influenced by political changes through the history.

### 3.2.4 Divadlo Sklep

This theatre was founded by David Vávra and Milan Šteindler in 1971 and they perform their specific humour even nowadays. This type of humour, using parody, grotesque, the absurd and satire, is well-known from works like *Mlýny*, *Pražská 5* or *Česká Soda*. In the last mentioned TV seriál, they presented satirical humour through fictive news, ridiculing mainly politicians and famous people, but they also created crazy commercials and the most famous sketches – *Alles Gute* (see appendix 17), the fictional TV lessons of German language. They were not afraid of uncovering various taboos, like sexuality, and this launched them to the most popular authors of 90s.

### 3.2.5 Šimek & Grossmann

Jiří Grossmann and Miloslav Šimek (see appendix 18) belong to the most popular humourists in Czech Republic (and former Czechoslovakia). Their rags, parodies and often black humour were played in SeMaFor theater. (Supraphon (b), 2010) Apart from theater performances they have also written many books and films, many of them also transferred on vinyl records, for example *Návštěvní den č.1, 2, 3* and other volumes, *Povídky* or *Besídka zvláštní školy*. More than whole performances people know their single sketches, stories or songs like *Jak jsme chovali užitečné zvíře*, *Jak jsem se naučil kouřit*, *Bratříčku, zavírej vrátka* or *Jak jsme přechovávali bělogvardějce*.

### 3.2.6 Bolek Polívka

This man has big influence on forming of Czech humour in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This humourist, actor, writer, clown and mime was inspired by grotesque and commedia dell'arte, and thus is well-known all over the world. He also cooperate with some theatres and humour ensembles abroad. His recognized mainly because of his *Manéž*, which is a performance not in theatre, but in a ring, or TV show called *Bolkoviny*. He is also known from Czech comedy films like already mentioned *Dědictví*, *Pelíšky*, or *Rominy*, but he also appeared in many serious movies like *Musíme si pomáhat* (this film by Jan Hřebejk was nominated on Oscar) or *Zapomenuté světlo* (he received Český lev, a Czech parallel of Oscar, for best male performance in leading role in both these films, see appendix 19). (Bolek.cz, 2010)

### 3.3 British Humour Legends

It will be surprising if there will be no legends in United Kingdom. Fortunately, there is a plenty of authors that need to be mentioned. I will present some of them that perform no more, and some that are still in the lights of British humour scene.

#### 3.3.1 The Pythons

I cannot begin with nobody else but these most famous British humourists. These 6 men (there were no woman characters in the ensemble, like in Divadlo Jáchyma Cimbura, but the actress Carol Cleveland is considered to be the 7<sup>th</sup> member of the group) – 5 actors and 1 animator created an epic phenomenon that is popular since its first premiere. Terry Gilliam, John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Terry Jones, Eric Idle and Michael Palin (see appendix 20), names that brings certain skits or persons from their work into your mind founded the humour group in 1969, and since that time they come through hundreds of skits in 45 episodes of their famous *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, where they lampoon every virtue of British and world's famous people or events, 5 full-length pictures including one recording of live performance in Los Angeles, and finished with their last creation, the documentary called *Monty Python's Almost the Truth*. People in our country could watch all their TV work on ČT 2, and it is interesting that none was dubbed, because subtitles can keep the ideas and gags a lot better than a dubbing.

*Flying Circus* (1969-74) was their first work that consisted of sketches connected with silly animations by Terry Gilliam. Some sketches were so fascinating, absurd or ridiculous that they were enhanced and transformed into a plenty of variations, entwined through a number of episodes. For example, the famous Spanish Inquisition skit, first premiered in the second series, occurred whenever it was mentioned. Another renowned sketches are *The Dead Parrot*, *The Ministry of Silly Walks* (see appendix 21) or *The Cheese Shop* – these and many others can be found on the Internet.

The group favoured social themes, such as poverty and richness, an intellect of inhabitants of different corners of the United Kingdom, political and religious themes. They created parodies, satires, ridiculed those themes and went to absolut edges of the humour. For instance, they asked a British vocal orchestra to record a song by The Pythons, and the orchestra agreed having the idea of some serious task. But when they were handed the text

beginning with “*Sit on my face and tell me that you love me...*“, all the members left the studio. (Monty Python: *Almost the Truth*, 2009)

### **3.3.2 Rowan Atkinson**

Another major figure of British humour is Atkinson’s *Mr. Bean*, celebrating 20 years this year. It has been launched on January 1, 1990 until November, 1995. Stories of a buffoon reminding a child in adult’s body became legendary all over the world right after the first episode. This success was converted into 2 full-length movies – *Bean: The Ultimate Disaster* and *Mr. Bean’s Holiday*, both very successful and hilarious, but not as good as the original series, and into animated series popular mostly among children (see appendix 22 and 23).

People do recognize particular sketches of Mr. Bean rather than whole episode in the same way as Python sketches, for instance New Year Party with Bean’s two friends or the Queen Elizabeth II scene. Besides the person of Bean (his first name has never been mentioned), people often connect him with an old Teddy doll, which has accompanied Bean on his journeys pretending it is real (Bean buys Christmas presents for him, washes him in a laundry, but it also served e.g. as a paint-brush), and the second thing that comes into your mind when Mr. Bean is mentioned is his BMC Mini car. Although Bean is mostly speechless, he is also involved in a love relationship with Irma. (TV.com, 2010)

However, Mr. Bean was not the only famous role of Rowan Atkinson. He has been quite popular since his satirical comedy *Not The Nine O’Clock News* and historical sitcom *Blackadder*. (IMDB.com, 2010) Not only he is a great comedy actor – The Observer has chosen him as one of the 50 most funniest actors in Britain in 2003 (TheObserver, 2003), he also has a Master of Science title of electrical engineering.

### **3.3.3 Fry and Laurie**

British comedy duo Stephen Fry, a journalist, actor and director, and Hugh Laurie, musician, writer and actor, mostly reknown as Dr. House, performed their sketches in 80s and 90s, and their work and humour style is very similar to The Pythons. They both acted in already mentioned *Blackadder* with Rowan Atkinson, and they have their own sketch series called *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* and *Jeeves and Wooster* (see appendix 24). Using their interesting ideas, they created a great show playing with the audience and their reactions,

and as Laurie has a musical nature, they also created a plenty of songs and musical skits, “*Your name, sir?*” is remarkable.

### **3.3.4 The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy**

A science fiction comedy by Adam Douglas, originally broadcasted on BBC as a radio programme in 1978, was transferred to the one of the most famous comedy books ever (see appendix 25). An unique combination of science fiction universe and British humour attracted millions of fans all over the world. The so-called book had another two sequels (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* and *Life, the Universe and Everything*) that make up a trilogy, parodying for example the original *Star Wars series* – first movie was the 4<sup>th</sup> episode of the whole nonalogy (9 episodes). Film producers saw a great opportunity for making a lot of money of this phenomenon and in 2005 they created a movie that did not gain as much quality and popularity as the original book. Disregarding this event, a fanbase of this book still grows, and since 2001 they all celebrate 25 May (it is two week after Douglas Adams died) as the Towel Day. (Towelday.org, 2010)

### **3.3.5 The IT Crowd**

The example of the modern British humour can be demonstrated on The IT Crowd situation comedy. Set in fictive corporation the story describes life events of entire 3 members of the Information Technology Department – Moss (Richard Ayoade), Roy (Chris O’Dowd) and Jen (Katherine Parkinson), who is the only staff member that absolutely unfamiliar with IT (see appendix 26). Although many computer technology terms are used in this sitcom, it is rather “oldschool“, using all the great hilarious ideas already seen in the performances of the Pythons or Fry and Laurie. The author, Graham Linehan, is also known for his *Black Books* series (Dylan Moran, the main protagonist of BB was co-working on the screenplay) and *Father Ted*. (The British Comedy Guide, 2010)

## Conclusion

To sum up, the aim of this thesis was to present what the term “humour” means, how it formed through the history and what are the main factors to understand it. Its goal was also to describe the humour in Czech Republic and United Kingdom, present some of their main features and to compare and contrast those features and, finally, to introduce some of the former and current persons or works that are in people’s awareness and that make Czech or British humour what they are now.

In the first chapter of my thesis I have roughly drafted what the humour is. I am using the word “roughly“, because humour, as you learned in the first chapter, is something that is really hard to describe and you need to read through many books and saw many movies to create the complete image of it, and everyone’s description is therefore unique. I have also depicted the main milestones in the history of humour since the first comedy plays in the Ancient Greece, through the famous works such as Divine Comedy or Don Quixote to the humour of 20<sup>th</sup> century with the spreading of humour via the television and the Internet. The last thing described in the part one is the problem of understanding the humour and what do we need to successfully perceive it.

Chapter two represents the main features of both Czech and British humour. We learned that they both have some features in common – they are both disrespectful to authorities of any kind, they both deal with everyday life and all its joy and sorrow or they both delight in the absurd, black or scatological humour. On the other hand, they have some other features that are incomparable, making Czech or British humour so unique, mainly they renown in the contemporary world, their form of presentation and their unique style.

The last chapter of my thesis introduced common patterns and themes (and their practical examples) used in creating jokes in Britain or Czech Republic. It also presented Czech and British humourists like Jára Cimrman, Voskovec and Werich, Divadlo Sklep or Monty Pythons, Mr. Bean, Adams’ book The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, and some others who make the humour in each country so favoured.

At the end of my thesis I want to say that the making of this thesis gave me a lot of experience and although the research was sometimes very difficult and tiresome, it had mostly an entertaining effect on me, because the researched material was almost 100% humour.

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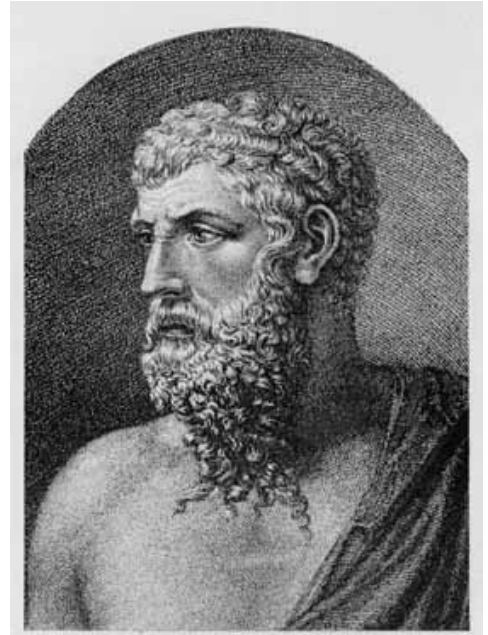
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## Appendix



1. Dionysus, drawn with his wine goblet



2. Aristophanes



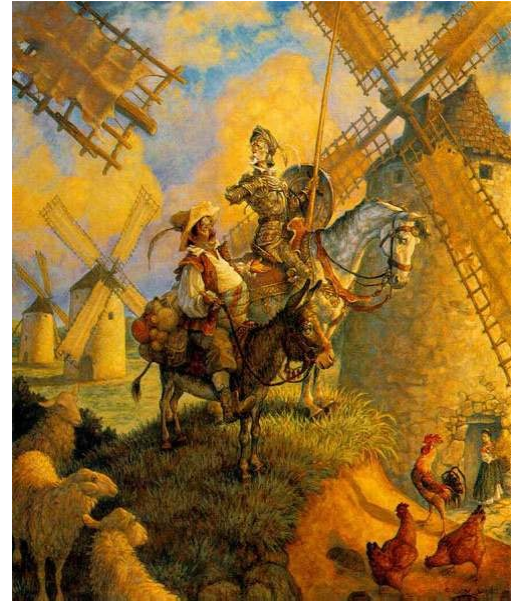
3. Dante Alighieri



4. Giovanni Boccaccio



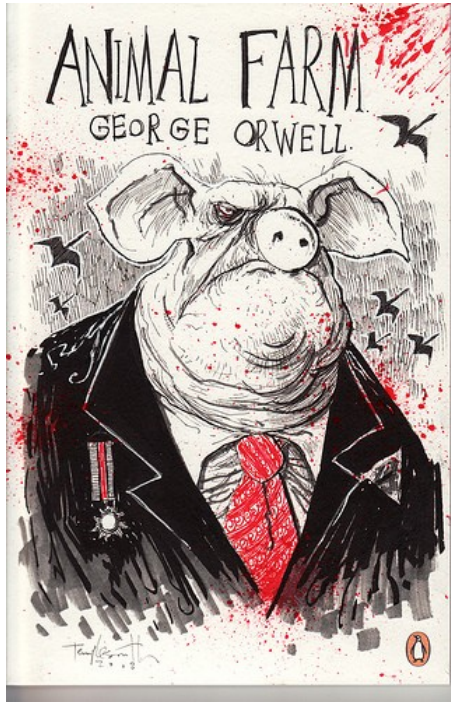
5. Geoffrey Chaucer



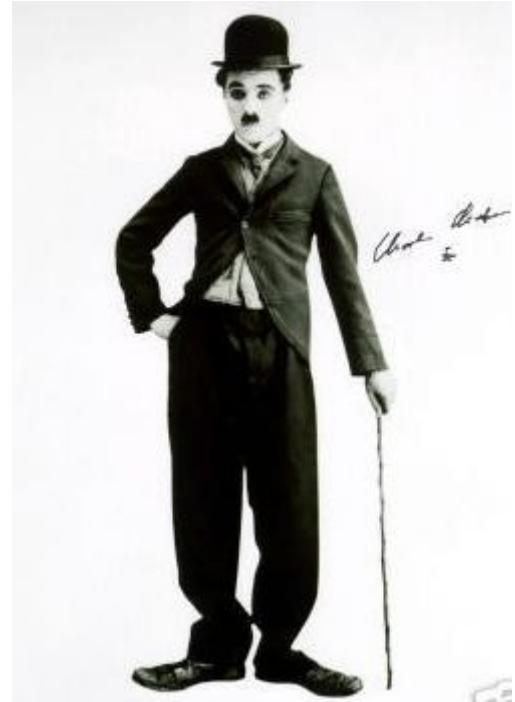
6. Don Quixote



7. Lemuel Gulliver, imprisoned by Liliputians



8. Animal Farm book cover



9. Charlie Chaplin



10. A stereotype



11. A stereotype



12. Divadlo Jary Cimrmana – the ensemble



13. A photo of Cimrman – he is standing next to the man in the black suit



14. Lada's illustration of Švejk



15. Rudolf Hrušínský as Švejk

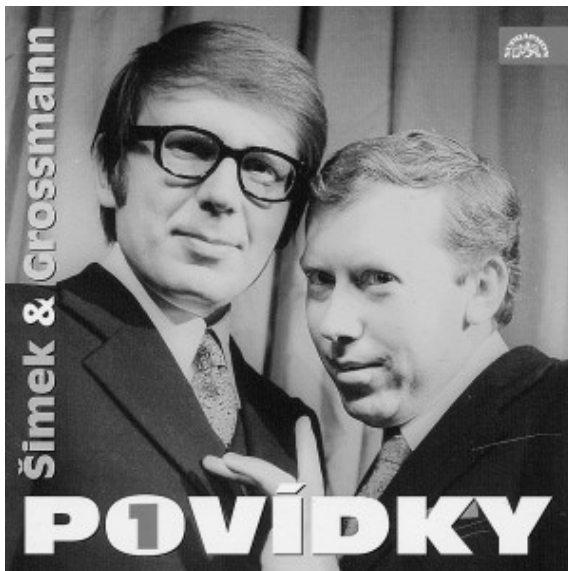


16. Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich





17. Karl and Egon – Milan Šteindler and David Vávra



18. Miloslav Šimek and Jiří Grossman



19. Bolek Polívka



20. The Pythons



21. The famous silly walk



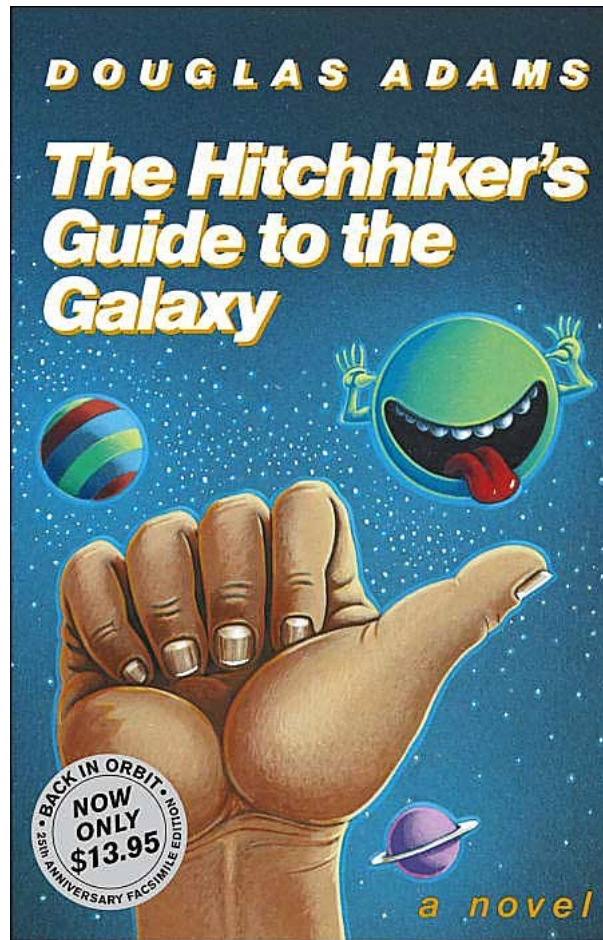
22. Rowan Atkinson



23. Mr. Bean in the one of his famous sketches



24. Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry



25. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy book cover



26. The IT Crowd – Moss, Jen and Roy