

КРИТИКА МЕДИАРЕЧИ

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April Fools' day news — still funny?

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The long tradition of joking connected with the first day of April seems to be dying out in the era of fake news and scary headlines published every day. The aim of the article is to show the status of April Fools' Day jokes in the Polish and English language context on the example of the material published on a single topic — swallowing inedible objects. In order to develop the methodology of analysis of humour in the news, it is useful to take into account the notion of incongruity, whether it is appropriate incongruity, background and foreground incongruities or various levels of meta-scripts. In order to discuss the collected material, it seems necessary to specify what kind of incongruities are involved as well as analyse the style of the stories in order to identify the intended message. The irrational behaviour of the stories' protagonists seems to point the readers in the direction of a comic reading, but the stories are accompanied by pictures and even videos which aim at proving their credibility. The analysis of the selected examples points to the presence of incongruities, which are enhanced by colloquialisms as well as quasi-punch lines. Some news published on the first day of April look like jokes, but do not end with the traditional April Fool punch line, while some others are similarly strange, although they are published on different occasions. Thus it is not easy to differentiate serious from non-serious news. The appearance of daily news with incongruous content could also be seen in a broader context as one of the elements of the trend towards “weirdization” of public discourse.

Keywords: humour, discourse, news, media, eating disorders.

Introduction

The April Fools' Day has a long tradition, celebrated nowadays in various forms across the globe; its origin remains uncertain although it is sometimes dated back to the Roman Hilaria festival (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/April-Fools-Day>). The contemporary

forms of the tradition have been described by folklorists, e. g. Moira Marsh [Marsh 2014; 2015] analysed their connections with practical joking, but this trend is also of interest to linguists and media studies researchers as it is strictly connected with the changing face of contemporary media sphere. In order to develop the methodology of analysis of humour in the news, it is useful to take into account the notion of incongruity, whether it is appropriate incongruity [Oring 2003], background and foreground incongruities [Hempelmann, Attardo 2011] or various levels of meta-scripts [Attardo 2009]. Indeed, in order to discuss the collected material it seems necessary to specify what kind of incongruities are involved as well as analyse the style of the stories in order to identify the intended message. The appearance of daily news with incongruous content could also be seen in a broader context as one of the elements of the trend towards “weirdization” of the public discourse (as noticed by Delia Chiaro [Chiaro 2019]).

Given the trend, the research questions one could ask are multiple: What are the differences between daily news and April Fools’ news? What are the factors which contribute to the emergence of incongruity in the daily news? Is it possible to differentiate fake news from real news? What is the difference between fake news and bona-fide news in terms of the way its potential humour is perceived? Do we deal with information or infotainment? What are the levels of meta-discourse that could be isolated in creating real news, fake news and jokes? Are April’s Fools’ news culturally specific? The answers to all these questions would require a much larger and multidisciplinary study. Within the scope of this paper we will focus on a limited aspect of the problem that could be addressed within contextual linguistics, that is on identifying some linguistic features of the news text that can give readers clues as to its humorous reading.

April Fools’ Day and fake news

One day a year, print, broadcast, and Internet media are full of spoofs and fabrications. They depart from normal and professional standards of journalism, but they tend to attract readers and audience attention [Marsh 2015: 135]. “The media spoofers actually spoof themselves — they raise disquieting concerns about their professional practice that are normally ignored” [Marsh 2015: 137]. “Features published on April Fools’ Day recount famous hoaxes of the past or suggest tricks that readers may try. Other ‘features’ are participatory rather than descriptive spoofs intended to fool readers”, “The ‘April Fool’ formula provides closure to the practical joke much as a punch line marks the end of narrative joke” [Marsh 2015: 33–34].

Still some news published on the first day of April look like jokes but do not end with the punch line, while some others are similarly strange, although they are published on different occasions, thus it is not easy to differentiate serious news from non-bona-fide one. *Fake news* as a term started to be popular when people realized how easy it is to be manipulated by information, as recipients do not have many opportunities to verify the message¹. *Fake news* is understood as the “information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts; it is disinformation that is presented as, or is likely

¹ Media scholars (e. g. [Ermida, Chovanec 2012; Ermida 2012]) talk also about “spoof news” or “mock journalism”.

to be perceived as, news. [...] If news is 'fake', it misinforms the public and democratic debate is polluted at the source" [McGonagle 2017: 203].

There are different strategies and numerous popular pieces of advice how to avoid fake news, e. g.: 1. Read past the headline! 2. Check the source 3. What kind of language does it use? 4. Who is the author? 5. Check who is reporting the same news 6. Look out for questionable photos and vague statements 7. Beware of personal bias 8. Know sites that can help you verify facts 9. Remember that videos can be altered too! 10. Think before you share [Mathur 2016]. Those hints may be useful, but some fake news seem so well prepared that their falseness is almost untraceable.

Not every piece of fake news needs to be funny or not every piece of funny news needs to be fake, thus distinguishing one from the other is quite complicated and not always possible. There is more and more weirdness in our public sphere and in media as the borderlines of acceptability have been pushed forward in the post-postmodern era, and the notions of decency, propriety or normalcy as well as the scope of (self)-censorship have been renegotiated. The acceptance of the fact that the world is complicated and colorful and not only black-and-white, combined with the possibility to demonstrate this through different social media make the presence of bizarre news more noticeable.

The terms *weirdization* (as Delia Chiaro uses it [Chiaro 2019]) or *bizarreness*² are notions very adequately describing the complex nature of the media sphere nowadays, as they point to its multi-faced and equivocal character, focused on attracting the readers' and viewers' attention by all means in order to raise interest and spread the information no-matter whether it is worth it. Most of the news is funny and scary at the same time, and evoke the high level of incongruity that may, but does not have to, produce the comic effect or allow for a comic reading.

Examples of bizarre daily news

The analysed bizarre news come from Polish and English websites (the oldest material comes from 2009, the newest from 2019). Interestingly, some of the news reports can be found among both Polish and English-language April Fools' Day news, but they also appear under different dates posing for everyday news, which shows the globalizing trends in international media circulation.

It occurs that the theme that is disproportionately popular among the bizarre news that we have collected is some people's peculiar eating habits. Although the relation of humans to food has been present as a vital part of culture from the beginning of civilization, in recent decades culinary programs have gained popularity all around the world, and culinary studies have been developing rapidly (cf. the recent special issue of *Electronic Journal of Folklore* on "Culinary Culture" [Laineste 2018]), thus it is not surprising that the topics related to food appear in the news as well. What is striking though is that specific, life threatening eating habits are mentioned in the news so frequently. Below we discuss four characteristic examples.

² The latter term is also used in context of literature by the Polish writer and Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk [Tokarczuk 2018] in her book titled *Bizarre Stories*. In the Polish original, *Opowiadania bizarne*, she created a neologism, an adjective, which is an English loanword: *bizarny*.

Example 1

Headline: Woman is addicted to eating sofas

While most people who have a sweet tooth love **munching** on cakes and biscuits, one US mum has a very different kind of **craving**.



Fig. 1. Woman is addicted to eating sofas. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1375586/Comfort-food-The-woman-stop-eating-sofas.html>

Mother-of-five Adele Edwards, from Florida, is addicted to another kind of snack — the suite kind, which most people **normally just sit on** to eat their dinner. Ms. Edwards apparently loves **chomping on household items** — such as elastic bands and rubbers. However, her biggest **weakness** is **snacking on the polyester stuffing** in her sofa.

Shockingly, during the course of her lifetime, Ms. Edwards believes she has eaten her way through **eight settees and five chairs, consuming almost 16 stone of cushion in the process**³.

This story appeared on Polish pages on the first of April, and so it could be treated as a hoax; yet we have traced the same information to the publication a day earlier in United Kingdom — thus we cannot be sure whether it was or was not connected with April Fools' celebrations. The headline stated clearly that the news concerned an addiction and the strangeness of it is enhanced by reminding readers of the *normal* use of sofas; its normality is emphasized by the use of colloquial words which focus on regular sounds that humans make while eating — *munching*, *chomping*, as well as by referring to the human *weaknesses*, such as the understandable need to *snack* in between meals. The “chomping on household items” or “snacking on the polyester stuffing” are descriptions that are unusual but imaginable in view of the punch line underlying the whole — the number of settees, chairs and cushions that the protagonist has eaten is represented in terms of weight; this is a shift intended to make an impression on the readers and amuse them by evoking the opposition between weight and number of the items and thus a comic reading. The news in both its Polish and English versions were accompanied by pictures, which were to increase the credibility of the story (the English version has the short video too which features the woman actually eating the couch cushion and explaining her addiction).

³ <https://metro.co.uk/2011/03/31/adele-edwards-is-addicted-to-eating-sofas-647775/>, <https://kobieta.wp.pl/kobieta-uzaleznioma-od-jedzenia-sofy-5982415738115201a> (highlights added in all examples).

Apart from news describing the custom of swallowing the soft pieces, there are also news which report on people eating more dangerous and harder objects.

Example 2

Headline: Chinese woman in hospital with **stomach-ache** after she **swallows spoon**

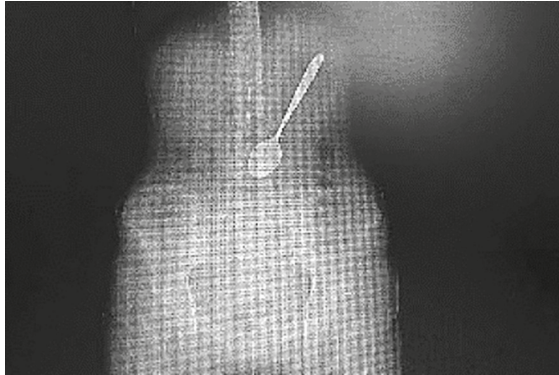


Fig. 2. Chinese woman swallows spoon. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/1854374/chinese-woman-hospital-stomach-ache-after-she-swallows-spoon>

A Chinese woman “accidentally swallowed” a **15cm-long stainless steel spoon** while eating a bowl of noodles, mainland media reports. The 27-year-old, identified only by her surname of Wang, went to hospital in Yangzhou, in Jiangsu province, on Sunday three hours after swallowing the spoon, *Modern Express* reports. [...]

Wang was sent home following the procedure after being discharged from hospital. **It was not reported whether Wang was given back her spoon.**

In this report once again we have the typical elements of the genre: the name and age of the participant, the place and time — to make the information more trustworthy — as well as the notion that something dangerous and unpleasant happened causing pain. The news writer expresses her distrust using the phrase “accidentally swallowed” in quotation mark and thus suggesting her suspicion of the original news source, while the information concerning the size of the swallowed object makes it clear that in reality it would be difficult not to notice such a long spoon while eating — especially that it was made from hard and non-elastic material. In addition the interviewed hospital director emphasizes that “First of all, you wouldn’t use a spoon to eat noodles”. The oppositions: small, soft, short / big, hard, long; edible/ inedible, suitable /unsuitable utensil evoke the incongruities. Another incongruous fragment is to be found in the last sentence of the report on the woman’s life threatening and unpleasant experience. The issue of giving or not giving back the spoon seems irrelevant and makes the sentence sound like a punch line intended to evoke a comic reading by introducing the opposition important/ not important, as well as unnecessary/ necessary and putting the whole news in the context of the contrast between dangerous and nonsensical or even scary and funny.

Example 3

Headline: Spaghetti: more dangerous than you'd think

A restaurant diner in Australia accidentally **swallowed a spoon** while eating a plate of pasta. The 26-year-old Sydney woman **gulled down the implement during a laughing** fit while eating spaghetti. She is reported to have gagged reflexively when she realised what had happened but by then it was too late⁴.

The above mentioned example is another case of incongruous message — seemingly innocent and safe soft food is contrasted with hard material that the spoon was made of. Like in example 1, the contrast is emphasized by the presence of the colloquial word *gulp*, which refers to a specific, quick way of eating in large mouthfuls, when one is hungry or in a hurry to finish the meal. The nice, pleasant and healthy habit of laughing is pictured as potentially dangerous, when it accompanies eating even quite safe type of food. Both pieces of description emphasize the abnormality of the situation. No illustration of the news was provided. In another version of the story, the spoon is said to have been a teaspoon and then a punch line is provided that stresses the child/adult and suitable /unsuitable utensil oppositions: “After removing the spoon “with great difficulty” in a 90-minute operation, doctors at Canterbury Hospital advised the woman **to grow up** and eat her spaghetti **with a fork.**”⁵

Example 4

Headline: **Eating spoons and forks disorder.** The cutlery removed from the woman's stomach



Fig. 3. Eaten spoons and forks. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/howaboutthat/6455477/Woman-swallows-78-items-of-cutlery.html>

Daalmans works as a secretary in a local estate agents and told doctors: “I don't know why but I **felt an urge to eat the silverware** — I could not help myself.”

Medics also revealed it was **not the first time** that she had been treated for eating the cutlery. They said she has been **diagnosed as suffering** from a borderline personality disorder that left her with an urge to eat cutlery and she was now getting **therapy**.

⁴ Read more: <https://metro.co.uk/2007/01/19/woman-swallows-spoon-by-accident-558627/?ito=cshare>; Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MetroUK>; Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MetroUK/>

⁵ <http://scottro.blogspot.com/2007/01/australian-woman-swallows-spoon-for.html>.

Doctors said there have reportedly been other cases as well of people being **treated for the urge to eat unsuitable objects** — but none that appear to have consumed **quite as much** cutlery in a single session.

They confirmed that the woman had only ever eaten forks and spoons — but never knives. They were unable to explain why.

The woman made a **full recovery** and is said to be responding well to her **treatment for the obsession**.

The last example describes the most unbelievable case of a woman who used to eat cutlery on a regular basis. The habit is defined as a medical case, the vocabulary (*urge, suffering, disorder, diagnose, therapy, recovery*) pointing to the illness in a very straightforward way. Even though the consequences and the health state of the patient are described, the story (and particularly the accompanying picture) emphasizes the quantity of the utensils swallowed, which makes the report quite incongruous and is likely to evoke a comic reading. In this serious and bona-fide mode of medical discourse, the point about the woman not eating knives seems completely out of place and only adds to the bizarreness of the news. Like in example 2, where the news reporter was not able to establish the apparently inconsequential fact whether the woman was actually given back her spoon, here too the reporter's inability to explain the reason for the protagonist not eating knives brings the apparently irrelevant information to the readers' attention and serves as a punch line of sorts.

Conclusions

We have analysed four examples of news concerning eating disorders and the swallowing of inedible objects that were published on different dates in Polish and English media. The time of their publication in some cases could suggest the relation with the tradition of April Fools' Day because of their misleading and frivolous style, but as their date and form vary it is difficult to ascertain that the news were produced as an entertaining act. Furthermore, the health of the people mentioned in the news seems to have been threatened, thus the news can be argued to aim at drawing attention to dangers connected with risky habits that might lead to unintended accidents. The news that start in a bona-fide mode of communication include several incongruities (oppositions) and sometimes a form of a punch line that allows the message to be read in a non-bona-fide mode.

The news presented in this paper all tell the story of particular problems faced by individuals. It so happens that they all are female, which is likely as women are said to suffer from eating disorders more frequently than men⁶. The main protagonists of the news discussed above live in different countries and their adventures with eating inedible objects all end well — they are either cured or saved by the surgical treatment; this adds to the possibility that the news could be given a humorous reading in accordance with the Aristotelian belief, stated in his *Poetics* that: “The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others” [Aristotle 2004]. Two had suffered with chronic disease and their acts were purposeful, while for two others the swallowing of spoons was accidental and happened once in their lifetime. All four stories were rather difficult to believe, and the degree of incredibility grows together with the rigidity, size

⁶ <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/research-on-males>.

or number of the objects the protagonists had eaten. The implausibility is enhanced by highly incongruous style⁷ (including unnecessarily colloquial words, and the discussion of unnecessary details, esp. those referring to something that the news reporters did not discover) that may lead to the doubts whether the stories are real. Three out of four stories were illustrated by the photos — one of a woman and her destroyed sofa-pillow (this story is also accompanied by the video, where the woman is shown eating the pieces of sofa cushions), another one of the X-ray picture with a spoon visible, and the third one with silverware arranged on the table⁸. The visualisation of the stories should give them more credibility, but actually some picture scenes (esp. the latter) could be easily set up — besides, showing the multiple sets of neatly arranged cutlery seems like exaggeration. Thus, from the linguistic point of view, the presence of incongruously colloquial expressions, unnecessary details or exaggeration seem to be giveaways of the humorous intention.

Whereas on the First of April different stories are published, some of them serious and real and some others strange and invented to fool the readers, a very similar trend has developed in everyday news, when among the trustworthy and bona-fide stories we can find bizarre and only locally important information written in order to draw attention or entertain the public. The credibility of news can thus be doubted year round, especially when news reporters seem to enhance their stories by using colloquialisms or enhancing the story's comic potential.

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⁷ For more information about humor and communication styles see e.g. publications by [Brzozowska, Chłopicki 2019; Chłopicki, Brzozowska 2017a; 2017b].

⁸ Actually one version of the third story (on swallowing a spoon while eating spaghetti and laughing) is accompanied by a picture of a child with a spoon in his mouth, which is apparently intended to evoke a comic reading.

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