

“*Vivi Pericolosamente*”: Christie Davies, Italians and dangerous things

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Abstract

This essay provides a brief overview of English jokes targeting Italians, and sets out to show how internet memes are a progression of traditional jokes in which Italians are the butts but with a modern twist.

Keywords: Italian jokes; Jokes about Italians; Memes; Internet humour.

At the 2017 ISHS Conference in Montreal, Christie asked me to take a selfie of the two of us together to post on Facebook. As I positioned my smartphone ready for the snapshot, instead of saying “Cheese” for some unknown reason, he begins to say, “*Vivi pericolosamente*”—the Italian for “Live dangerously”—not the easiest word for a non-Italian speaker to utter. As I was not wearing my reading glasses, I accidentally, pressed the record button. This resulted in my posting a live gif of Christie trying to utter a rather long word in Italian, and both of us in fits of laughter as he stumbles at every syllable.¹ At that moment, little did I know that Christie was living on borrowed time. In retrospect, he certainly did live those last few weeks before his passing dangerously, doing things like smuggling a huge plastic cup full of coffee into Montreal’s Notre Dame Cathedral under his oversized bright yellow plastic raincoat, after all said he, “They wouldn’t stop an old man with a stick”. He also irritated a “comedian” at a stand-up venue by heckling her—as is to be expected at such events—so that she ended up calling him “a drunken Irishman”. How was she to know that he was neither Irish nor a drunkard but that he was Welsh and teetotal. A few weeks later, back in Reading he entertained visitors from his hospital bed with his captivating stories. More than a ward, his room resembled a salon where family and friends came to pay homage to a person of substance. In fact, Christie sat there keeping court with his often-undiplomatic thoughts that led to much laughter and like naughty children, we found ourselves restraining our loud chatter and merriment so as not to disturb the somewhat grumpier occupier of the other bed.

Christie had also lived dangerously throughout his numerous visits to Italy. The categorical way he had of expressing his views once caused a couple of colleagues to walk out of his lecture and write a letter of complaint to the head of my department. Yet he loved Italy and on

his numerous visits over the past twenty years, he has left his mark not only on me, but also on my close friends and my family, too. My two eldest daughters will remember him at the ISHS Conference in Baltimore in 2001, among other things, for teaching them a rude ditty about the then President of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi and coaching them to march “like Mussolini”. “The FBI” was a nonsensical song (music and lyrics by Christie Davies) that my girls fondly remember. I will never forget him leading a march with Jessica and Rebecca following close behind around the University of Maryland campus, the three of them with their right fists raised, loudly singing “Aye, aye the FBI”.

Within Humour Studies Christie is best known for his work on how and why particular groups of people regularly become the target of jokes. His robust volume of work examines jokes that target every imaginable social category—ethnic communities, religious groups, political parties, professions, gay men, lesbians, wives, mothers-in-law and fair-haired women are just some of the classes of folk that came under his scrutiny and, of course, Italians were no exception. According to Christie, at the end of the day, we replay the same old jokes by simply changing the characters. The orchestra may change, but repeatedly, it is the same old song.

Christie was not especially tech-savvy. Although if he were here now he would be likely to disagree, nowadays something has changed in joke cycles. The medium has very much become the message as the internet, especially via mobile technology, has become the number one vehicle for creating and conveying much humour. I recall in the days following 9/11 going on line to the screeching sound of my noisy modem waiting for the first disaster jokes to come in so that I could relay the time lapse between tragedy and joke to Christie. In the years that followed, I continued to do so in the wake of disasters and deaths of celebrities. Nowadays disaster jokes appear so quickly after the event, especially in the form of memes, that I will often receive a joke on my phone and am thus able to guess that an unfortunate event has occurred, before actually reading about it. Something that would have no doubt delighted Christie.

Jokes about Italians by Italians and for Italians

Until very recently, Italy had a strong tradition of immigration. Christie (Davies 1998) famously argues that certain types of ethnic humour—those in which the outsider or the newcomer into a community is in some way represented as inferior to the central group—arise from feelings of economic and/or sexual fear of a consolidated and well-established group towards the new “peripheral” group entering their society. When the “*meridionali*” from the poorer southern regions of Italy did not migrate overseas, they would seek employment in the more affluent cities of the north, especially the more industrialised Milan and Turin. Googling “*barzellette sui meridionali*” (“jokes about southern Italians”) produces 233,000 hits, while googling “*barzellette sui terroni*” produces 129,000 hits—“*terrone/i*” is a highly derogatory term used by northerners to refer to a person from the south of Italy. The term “*terrone*” derives from the term “*terra*” meaning “land” thus supporting another of Christie’s arguments regarding jokes and their targets. In his “stupid versus canny” dichotomy, those who are involved in material things such as working the land are often portrayed as less clever than their more superior counterparts who work with their brains and are therefore often “canny” (2011: 20–21). Moreover, in Italian jokes, southerners are also depicted as lazy and unlikely to adhere to social norms.

What is the difference between a bird and a *terrone*? A bird comes up, does its job and then goes home. The *terrone* comes up, doesn’t work and doesn’t go back home...²

In Milan, traffic lights are an instruction, in Rome a suggestion and in Naples a Christmas decoration.³

In a five-storey building Venetians occupy the first floor, Sicilians the second, Calabresi the third, Pugliesi the fourth and Neapolitans the fifth. A terrible earthquake destroys the building; everyone is killed except the Venetians. They were at work.⁴

So typically, as well as seeing them as reckless drivers, northern jokes about southerners also portray them as others who cannily shy away from work. Furthermore, stupidity jokes in Italy are typically pinned onto the Carabinieri, one of the country's police forces, which traditionally recruits from "the rustics of southern Italy" in search of easily available employment (Davies 1998: 37). Today, however, while Carabinieri jokes continue to exist, alongside those about stupid southerners we now find many in which so-called "extra-comunitari" (literally those "from outside the European Union") in which manual workers from Asia, Africa and Albania are the butt. Yet Italy is still divided within itself and jokes about southerners still exist. A typical chant heard in football stadiums in the north of Italy when the Napoli team is playing include a number of racial slurs and references to southerners' lack of cleanliness and laziness. Northerners portray "meridionali" in jokes as dirty, lazy imbeciles. When southerners are targeted, the verbal humour may be an amalgam of their dirtiness/stupidity plus references to the numerous natural disasters that the South has undergone. Football chants typically lampoon the cholera outbreak in Naples in 1973, (caused by dirty living conditions?) as well as the earthquakes that are especially common in Southern Italy. According to De Mauro's Italian Dictionary, the term "Terra ballerina"—"dancing ground"—is a "scherzoso"—"teasing"—form of address for people from the south. Rome is only about 200 kilometres north of Naples, yet supporters are far away enough to consider Neapolitans their dirty southern inferiors in their chants. A case of good humour bad taste?

*Senti che puzza scappano li cani
stanno arrivando i napoletani
o colerosi, terremotati,
con il sapone non vi siete mai lavati.....
Napoli merda, Napoli colera
sei la vergogna dell'Italia intera,
Napoletano sporco africano
stai pur sicuro prima o poi ti accoltelliamo !
Oh
odio Napoli odio Napoli Odio Napoli.⁵
[What a smell the dogs are escaping
the Neapolitans are arriving
Oh cholera stricken, earthquake victims
who have never washed with soap
Napoli shit, Napoli cholera
You are the shame of all of Italy
Neapolitan, dirty African
Sooner or later be sure that we'll knife you
Oh
I hate Naples, I hate Naples I hate Naples.]*

(Author's translation)

Jokes about Italians by non-Italians

Italian students are always surprised to discover that beyond the country's borders, there are scores of jokes about the Italian militia.

Q. How do you recognize an Italian tank? A. It has one forward gear and four reverse.
(Famularo 2011:64)

Q. What is the shortest book in the world? A. The book of Italian war heroes.⁶

Christie (1998) has explored these jokes at length, claiming that stories of Italian military ineptitude, retreat and defeat are not only perceived as humorous across Europe, but along with "...stories about German militarism, organization, dedication, efficiency and atrocities are universally known, accepted and even seen as significant throughout Europe" (148). According to Christie, these stories go back hundreds of years, probably originating in France where they can be traced back to a medieval comic image of the Lombards, the mockeries of Rabelais and the jocularly of Montaigne. In fact, a cycle of Italian jokes emerged after the humiliating French defeat by the Axis powers followed by occupation in 1940, "...such jokes are thus a statement of the self-image of the French as the warrior nation of Europe, an assertion of *la gloire de la France*" (Davies 2002). In an early attempt at political correctness, during World War II, the BBC had gone so far as to ban jokes about unsoldierly Italians; nevertheless, the following example was broadcast over the radio in 1941:

What is it that has feathers on the head but isn't a bird—has two legs but runs faster than a hare?
I don't know, what is it?
An Italian soldier.

(Ugolini 2011: 44)

Rather than being about cowardice, Italian military jokes are about surrendering or changing sides, two aspects that reflect Italian history of a divided nation that has only recently become united. And as we have seen, is still divided in terms of jokes that they themselves circulate. Moreover, Christie's "cowardly/militaristic" dichotomy is one of the "comically defective attributes" (along with stupid/canny; promiscuous/sexless and drunken/teetotal) to be found in ethnic jokes. Christie claimed that they stem from four essential anxieties of modern society. These defective attributes are simply pinned onto appropriate groups (188). In the case of the cowardly/militaristic opposition, examples are found in the joked-about group's military history. In the absence of a local group, jokes borrow from a distant country. In Anglo-Saxon countries (and not only) Italy seems to lend itself perfectly to be joked about in terms of militaristic under-achievement.

Over and above military cowardice, my students are also surprised to find that Italians in English language jokes appear as a bunch of "*dagoes*" (a disrespectful term used to refer to a person of Italian or sometimes Hispanic origin or descent) who have greasy skin:

Q. Why don't Italians have freckles? A. Because they slide right off.⁷

Q. What do you call a pimple on an Italian? A. A grease fitting.⁸

Christie contended that unlike US, Canadian and Swiss jokes about Italians, most European jokes about them do not include the trait of dirtiness. The term "dirty" has a stronger inference than the term "stupid" so an advocate of hostility theory would argue that Americans feel more antagonistic towards Italians than Europeans do. It is the lack of presence of the trait of dirtiness in European jokes that strengthens the claim that the US is a "...country obsessed with rational

hygiene and physical perfection” (1998: 173) rather than feelings of anti-Italianness. Why it should be that US, Canadian and Swiss jokes see Italians as being dirty is hard to say. In Canadian jokes, Newfoundlanders are also portrayed as dirty and in the US, alongside filthy Italians we find jokes populated with unwashed Poles too. In the UK and Italy, the Irish and carabinieri are stupid but they are spotlessly clean.

Whether cowardly or dirty, Christie took care to highlight that others do not really see Italians as being neither lily-livered nor unclean. In fact, Christie strongly disagreed with the Freudian view that jokes are tendentious, but he did believe that they reveal attitudes and values of the group that tells the jokes.

Again, in English language jokes about Italians in on-line collections, both male and female Italians often have excessive body hair:

Q: Why do Italian men grow moustaches? A: So they can resemble their mothers.

Q: How do you recognize an Alitalia plane? A: From the hair beneath its wings.

Q: If Tarzan and Jane were Italian, what would Cheetah be? A. The least hairy of the three.

Q: Did you hear about the winner of the Italian beauty contest? A: Me neither.⁹

Jokes about hairy Italians also surprise my students. Suffice it to walk down a busy street in Italy to see that Italian men and women of all ages, but especially the women, are, generally speaking, extremely well groomed. Women certainly do not sport excessive body hair. Could it be that these jokes about, hairy women, like those about personal hygiene, reflect an American obsession with personal cleanliness and body control? Mediterranean people are generally darker and naturally have more hair than people from the north have but we live in a society in which body hair (especially in females) is considered “unsightly” and “superfluous” unless, of course, it is on our heads in which case we must have lots of it. Thus, in these ethnic jokes something that is normal and human is transformed into negative otherness. Furthermore, from Sofia Loren to Monica Bellucci, Italian women in the common imaginary are considered beautiful, so why are they ugly in American jokes? Because they are thought to be hirsute? It is likely that this exemplifies semi-racial otherness and a different version of the stereotype of the “dirty” other to which an abundance of hair is added to general uncleanliness.

Therefore, outside Italy, Italians are grouped as an entity, regardless of the north south divide. Whether they are from Milan or Palermo, jokes involving Italians will portray the men as greasy skinned criminals with a fixation for spaghetti, while the women will typically display excessive body hair. And of course, let us not forget the countless mafia jokes.

Q. Do you know why Italians are magicians? A. They can make people disappear.¹⁰

However, these jokes are hardly malicious especially if we compare them to jokes about Germans that can be quite vicious. The British tabloids (jokingly?) labelled Pope Benedict XVI “God’s Rottweiler” implicitly comparing him to a member of the Third Reich SS. There is something more spiteful in this than joking about Italian military cowardice. Without malice, but equally without compassion, even the quality press in Britain perpetuates the stereotype of Germans on holiday. It is said that Germans get up at dawn so as to take possession of the sun loungers around the pool before other tourists. Again there is something unsympathetic about this portrayal of Germans while there certainly seems to be some comic empathy towards Italians despite their purported hairiness and criminal inclination. This may well be due to the fact that they have rarely been powerful in modern times. Unlike the French or the Germans or the Russians, Italians have not yet been as tyrannical or as potent. Therefore, humorous

discourse about Italians tends to be affable rather than malevolent, unlike what happens in joke forms towards so many other ethnic groups. Italians may be portrayed as bad soldiers, but at the same time, they are seen as good human beings who as immigrants tend to integrate well and not cause problems.

They [Italians] realise that charm works better than arrogance. They sell meals and ice cream, which forces them to be friendly. The meals are good and the food has status. They are not so successful as to cause envy nor so useless as to be a burden. They are bad Catholics and do not irritate people of other religions. Therefore, there are no political, economic or religious reasons to hate them.

(Christie Davies, personal communication).

Finally, a word about natural disasters. As I asserted previously northerners, or “*polentoni*” (“eaters of polenta” as opposed to southerners who prefer “*pasta asciutta*”) stand divided from the “*meridionali*” of the south. Yet dirty laundry is washed at home. While the two groups remain in opposition on home ground, so much so that references to natural disasters become a form of address as in “*terra ballerina*”, woe betide if non-Italians so much as dare to joke about any of them. The Charlie Hebdo cartoons that satirised the Aquila earthquake by depicting victims as forms of pasta sparked anger and criticism nationwide. Yet it remains acceptable for northerners to taunt southerners with such mentions at football stadiums.

Joking about Italians on-line

There are numerous websites dedicated to jokes that contain chapters on ethnic jokes of the type that Christie had examined over the years. Christie preferred books to the Internet and owned a large collection of joke books that he bought on his travels around the world and from second hand bookshops in the UK. However, websites like Jokes4Us, Laughfactory and so on are, in effect, on-line versions of joke books with the difference that since the advent of Web 2.0, on many of these sites, users can evaluate jokes with a “like” or even contribute with their own examples. Nonetheless, apart from the traditional joke—a verbal text consisting of a script containing some kind of incongruity that defeats the listeners’ expectations—on line joking has extended to a series of different forms. One of the most popular joke forms on-line consists of images combined with amusing captions. Just like traditional jokes, it is the people, the general public, who create these visual/verbal jokes for other people to enjoy. Image macros, or memes, usually consist of the same image of an iconic personality, for example, that will unendingly be repeated across the Web. Users will add different verbal content to the image, in the form of a caption, to render the text humorous. The enjoyment of this form of play partly lies in the intertextuality of the image and the caption, the recognition of an original. Shifman, who has carried out extensive research to this phenomenon, describes this creation of humour in terms of “explicit manipulation of mass-mediated content” (2014).

Of course, traditional jokes themselves are also memes in the sense that they replicate units of cultural meaning (Dawkins 1976), but to the layperson, the term “meme” itself has now come to refer uniquely to these humorous images on-line. Furthermore, as Christie repeatedly argued, all ethnic jokes could be reduced to a handful of narratives and thus are every bit as memetic as current Internet memes.

Returning to Italians, they certainly do not escape from being the target of memes. From the “How Italians Do Things” meme featuring pictures of people carrying out numerous activities while making a finger purse hand gesture, with the caption “How Italians X” to Italian military memes, what we have is an updated version of Christie’s ethnic jokes.¹¹ They are

cyber-joke cycles. If once jokes people spread these jokes by word of mouth, these visual/verbal texts are spread—or rather “shared” by touching our smartphones.

Googling “Italian military meme” produces a staggeringly high 15 million returns. According to the “Know your Meme” website, the first of Italian military meme appeared in January 2017 and featured pizza-shaped flotation devices floating in water with the caption “Italian Navy”.¹² Most Italian military memes feature a well-known Italian food, usually pizza or spaghetti accompanied by a caption referring to Italian warfare. Therefore, slices of pizza tossed into a gutter stand in for Italian soldiers (Figure 1) or else dead Italian soldiers are depicted as spaghetti splattered onto a tiled floor (Figure 2) and the remains of an Italian attempt at nuclear warfare becomes an exploding mushroom shaped pizza in an oven (Figure 3). Such absurd memes in which Italian foods replace warships and tanks may well be superseding the classic joke that targeted the inadequacy of Italian military. Some of the more basic militia memes consist of aeroplanes made out of pasta shapes, but when the wings of a fighter plane or a donkey’s saddle are replaced with a pizza to represent the Italian air force and cavalry, it may become harder for Italians to keep their good sense of humour. Without doubt, Italians are degraded and dehumanised when represented by a slice of pizza.

Slain Italian soldiers during the WWII
Invasion of Sicily, 1943 (colorized)



Figure 1. Internet meme targeting Italian Militia (1)



Figure 2. Internet meme targeting Italian Militia (2)



**Early Italian nuclear test
(colourized, 1957)**

Figure 3. Internet meme targeting Italian warfare

Wherever we turn, Italianness seems to be principally connoted by food. Of course, this is not a bad thing, but it does cease to be jovial when dehumanisation goes too far. One sub-category of Italian memes consists of drawings of parts of the human body. These colourful drawings are quite different from those featured in the well-known text book *Gray's Anatomy*. Each diagram of a body part that is labelled, for instance “the human skin”, “the human heart”, etc., is juxtaposed with a diagram of “Italian skin”, “Italian heart”, etc. The illustration of the Italian digestive system consists of a long curled up sausage, blood cells become meatballs, the DNA helix fusilli (pasta twists), etc. (see Chiaro 2017). Whatever the meme, the Italian body part will illustrate an Italian food. Clearly, Italians are not human if “human” organs counterpoint “Italian” body parts.

Why are Italian women good at parking?

One evening in Reading, Christie very kindly offered me a lift to the restaurant where we were going to dine. However, once outside the restaurant, he had great trouble parking in what seemed to be a perfectly reasonable space for his smallish car. Once, twice, three times he tried, but to no avail, he was unable to park the car in the bay. Getting piqued, I told Christie to get out and that I would park the car. Crestfallen, he quietly obeyed and I swiftly parked the car in the small space. A couple of years later, Christie was in the middle of a keynote (possibly ISHS Copenhagen?) about ethnic jokes. He must have been talking about Italians when, quite out of the blue he told his audience that he had never been so humiliated in all his life as the one time he had been unable to park his car in a difficult space. “Not only was the person who managed to park it a woman”, he said, “but she was also Italian”. What can you do, Christie? After all, you know as well as I do that Italians always do it better.

Notes

¹ Video available at: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100013278220149>.

² Joke retrieved from Barzellette sui Terroni. Available at: <http://fantacupola.forumfree.it/?t=25822535>.

³ Joke retrieved from The Italy Forum. Available at: <http://italy.forumotion.com/t383-jokes-about-italiansml>.

⁴ My translation of an Italian joke. Available at: <https://it.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110917102536AAUmeFd>. All but the Venetians in the joke are from the southern regions of Italy.

⁵ Retrieved from an on-line forum of supporters of the Roma football team. Available at grazieroma.forumfree.it/?t=16334343. Retrieved 30 September 2017. Notably, Rome is only about 200 km north of Naples.

⁶ This is a traditional joke included in “The Shortest Books in the World” series, along with “British cuisine”, “German Humour”, etc. Available at: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Shortest%20Books%20in%20the%20World>.

⁷ Joke available at: http://www.anvari.org/shortjoke/Questions_and_Answers/1158_q-why-dont-italians-have-freckles-a-because-they-slide-off.html.

⁸ Joke available at: <http://www.markthispot.com/jokes/italian.htm>.

⁹ These jokes were all retrieved from a website called You can be funny. Available at <http://www.you-can-be-funny.com/ItalianJokes.html>. However, the same jokes can also be found on other similar websites such as Jokes4Us. Available at:

<http://www.jokes4us.com/miscellaneousjokes/worldjokes/italyjokes>. Googling the term “greasy Italians” produces 226,000 hits.

¹⁰ Joke available at:

<http://www.jokes4us.com/miscellaneousjokes/worldjokes/italyjokes.html>.

¹¹ See <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/how-italians-do-things>. Accessed 2 October 2017.

¹² See <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/italian-military-jokes>. Accessed 2 October 2017.

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