HUMOUR IN SONGS

Monty Python: "Monty Python Sings"

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<u>Preface</u>

"Monty Python Sings" is a collection of the most well known songs performed by the British comedy group Monty Python. This is due to the fact that a lot of these songs are taken from the soundtracks to films like "The Life of Brian", "The Meaning of Life" or from episodes of the "Monty Python's Flying Circus" series.

   Now the aim of my work is to have a closer look at these songs and to analyse the kind of humour they stand for. But before analysing the songs in detail I want to give a short history of the group, a short survey of their resources and of their work.

    As the beginning of my analysis I want to categorise the different songs in generic topics to give the following detailed analysis some kind of structure. Within these categories I want to take one or two songs of each topic as a basis for analysing the linguistic devices and psychological processes connected with humour.

   At the end of the paper I am going to sum up the findings of my work and have a concluding look at the characteristic features of the kind of humour Monty Python stands for and the means they most often use to make people laugh.

1. The Life of Monty Python

1.1. Influences[1]

Monty Python was founded in 1969 with the debut of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" broadcasted on British television on October 5th. You can say that Monty Python is a creation of the sixties but its antecedents stretch back long before that to the immediate post - war period when the six constituent members were in their respective childhoods.

In the Britain of 1950 humour was derived from three main sources: print, film and radio. Broadcasting had begun in 1922 with the establishment of the British Broadcasting Company and after the second World War radio reached into every home in the land. While in its beginning radio was generally serious and respectably middle-class it soon followed the model of American-style radio with its situation comedies and shows build around comic personalities. This even increased during World War II and afterwards, so that throughout the 1950s radio was still the dominant source of broadcast comedy, although television was first introduced in 1936.

This development and a change in government led to the formation of a new type of undergraduate at the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which all members of Monty Python attended, except Terry Gilliam, who is American. So this new breed of undergraduate held ambitions for careers in the arts and media, rather than the law and the civil services. The universities' different art clubs became the springboard for the careers of a lot of British stars. Beside the members of Monty Python others like the comedian Dudley Moore or Richard Ingrams and Christopher Booker, who launched the periodical "Private Eye", made their way.

1.2. Members[2]

The following chapter will give you some information about each of the six Monty Python members. This knowledge should be a help to show how Monty Python come across the topics they make fun about.

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[1]George Perry, The Life of Python, London: Pavilion Books, 1994, pp. 10 - 19.
[2]Perry, pp. 20 - 105.

Michael Palin was, just like Terry Jones, an Oxford student. They first met at that university where they booth read English, with Terry Jones being very engaged about the Middle English period. During their time as students they joined the college Drama Society and started to write sketches together. After having finished their studies their ways parted and both did several jobs for different television companies, but also did some work together. Besides his success with Monty Python Michael Palin is a writer of film scripts, sketches, stage plays and children's books. Terry Jones, the most engaged about Monty Python, also writes children's books and works as a film director.

As mentioned above Terry Gilliam is American. After finishing his studies of political science he worked for the humour magazine "Help!", when he first met John Cleese, who was doing a Broadway show at that time. When he moved from America to England he worked as a television cartoonist at the BBC and he made the animations for the "Monty Python's Flying Circus" series. He also works as film director. Along to the Monty Python films he directed films like "Time Bandits" or "The Fisher King".

The rest of the Monty Python members are former Cambridge students: John Cleese read law, Eric Idle studied English and the late Graham Chapman read medicine. Each of them joined the "Footlights", which is an art club that regularly stages a show in revue format and so called "smokers" which are informal concerts[3]. During their time at the "Footlights" Cleese and Chapman became a team in writing sketches which also continued during their time with Monty Python. Graham Chapman played in cabaret, television and radio comedy shows. He died in 1989 of cancer. John Cleese wrote his own comedy series "Fawlty Towers", several film scripts and acted in numerous films.

Eric Idle did several shows with "Footlights" and then, after finishing his studies, began to write sketches professionally. It must also be mentioned that he is the musical talent of Monty Python. After his time with the group he made some comedy series for different television companies, played at the English National Opera and he has published several books.

So some of the Python members worked together in the earlier years of their careers but the first step to bring them together was set by Barry Took, a comedy producer and advisor at the BBC, who worked with each of them at one of their earlier projects. In 1969 he brought them together which led to the birth of Monty Python.

1.3. Work

The main reason for working together as a group was the big success of the first series of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" . Until 1974 they produced three other series for the BBC with John Cleese not being part of the group while doing the fourth series.

   Monty Python also produced four movies the stories of which are due to the different interests of the group's members: "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" (1974), "The Life of Brian" (1979), Monty Python live at the Hollywood Bowl" (1982), which is a collection of their sketches performed live in America and "The Meaning of Life" (1983).[4]

   There are also several books of and about Monty Python and a lot of recordings of their work. Each member of the group has of course produced a lot of work on his own of which I have mentioned the most important when portraying each Monty Python member.

2. Monty Python Sings

This CD is a compilation of some of Monty Python's best known songs. A lot of them are taken from their films: "The Life of Brian", "The Meaning of Life" or "Monty Python and the Holy Grail". Some others were first seen and heard in the "Monty Python's Flying Circus" series.

   During the preparations for the paper I tried to find out about the origin of the songs, and I managed to do so for most of them. It seems important to me to know about the film scenes which finally are a kind of "video clip" to the actual song. So this is why I want to describe these scenes - as far as possible - when analysing each song. This will give a certain help for an interpretation and analysis.

   The first step towards a detailed analysis will be a categorisation of the different songs in some generic topics of humour which should also give things a certain kind of structure. As the first category I have chosen "Authority" because it is the most common

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[3]Perry, p. 13.
[4]Perry, pp. 187 - 189.

topic. In nine out of twenty-five songs Monty Python mock about persons or things logically connected with this term. The songs are about historical or contemporary statesmen, important historical personalities like philosophers or composers and finally an institution which - maybe because of its rigid character - seems to be strongly connected with humour: the church.

The largest of these categories I want to entitle as "The Familiar" according to the hand-out of our class. The songs of this group deal with death, foreigners or situations of everyday life. Making fun of well known things can for example be done by distorting given facts or by mixing up familiar concepts with situations that give an opposing connotation. Another way would be the breaking up with social frames which for me, after having a look at the life of Monty Python, seems to be their favourite.

The next category is the opposite of the previous: "The Unfamiliar". The topic of two of the songs I have chosen as examples is the meaning of life. They are a humorous/philosophical approach towards the questions: "What is life?" and "Why do we live?" The third song shows that even singing about nonsense can sometimes sound philosophic.

The last and probably the most controversial category is called "The Unspeakable". And as the term may suggest it is about sex: sexual practices, sexual organs, and venereal diseases. Obscenity is a topic which will hardly ever become socially accepted even in connection with humour. But to my mind the concepts of these three songs are that brilliant and funny that they lose quite a lot of their controversial character.

3. Analysis

3.1. Authority

Oliver Cromwell[5]

The most interesting thing about this song is that the lyrics are written to the music of Frederic Chopin's "Polonaise No. 6. Op S3 in Ab". This gives the song its weird character because the music was never meant to be sung along with. The arrangement of music and lyrics makes it quite hard to listen to it. But the complexity of this composition is a bit loosened by the use of internal rhyme and alliterations.

Another thing is the constant switching between different types of code and key. The spoken parts of the song are formal and spoken in a serious voice which can be compared to the one of a newscaster. The parts which are sung are also formal but sometimes broken up by informal comments("and the king lost again, silly thing, stupid git") which is normally not allowed in this context. But the reason why the whole thing seems so ridiculous is the use of a whining, squeaking voice.

The irony used in this song is always in connection with comments about the actions of King Charles I which splits up the reactions of the listener in positive ones towards Oliver Cromwell and negative ones towards the king. "And the King fled up North, like a bat to the Scots." The other way to stress these feelings are the sarcastic remarks about the death of King Charles I: "He was 5' 6" tall at the start of his reign, but only 4' 8" tall at the end of it." A similar impression is caused by the use of an antithesis in the final part of the song: "Down came the axe [...] the only sound that could be heard was a solitary giggle..." This is emphasised by the sound of an axe chopping off a head, which can be heard in the back ground.

The humour is based on this absurd matching of inappropriate tune and text. The complex construction is unexpected and targets the subconsciousness of the listener. It plays with his feelings: should he be amused or should he find the harmonisation of music, voice and content repulsive.

Bruces' Philosophers Song (Bruces' Song)[6]

This song has all characteristics of a drinking song: the lively rhythm and music and a couple of men singing along with it. The constant internal rhyming of the philosopher's names with - mostly - slang words or words connected with drinking and the use of end rhymes intensifies this feeling and lets the song even sound more vivid.

The code used is informal. The text contains a lot of slang words connected with drinking. This does not match the topic "philosophers" at all. It is intended to be a parody on the serious and scientific picture that people normally associate with those people. The use of Australian dialect, slang and the form and concept of a drinking song ridicules this impression.

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[5]for detailed lyrics see p. 18.
[6]see p. 18.

The author uses allusions like "I drink, therefore I am" in connection with Rene Descartes. Another example for this would be "of his own free will". This refers to John Stuart Mill, who did philosophical work on politics. Sometimes the term "drinking" is paraphrased in metaphors. So Nietzsche's knowledge about "the raising of the wrist" should give the impression of the gesture when lifting a glass and drinking. The meaning of the line "who could think you under the table" points in two directions: The first can be a metaphor to the fact of Heidegger being a brilliant thinker but the other implies the act of drinking. If this was the case the use of the word "think" could be seen as an intended lapse. Another proof for this theory is the term "schloshed", which really is "sloshed" and a slang word for "being drunk". These lapses are intended to increase the impression of a drinking song with the men singing it being too drunk to pronounce correctly.

The song breaks with the cultural knowledge and norms which tell us that famous personalities like philosophers never can be mentioned in connection with a socially "despised" topic like excessive drinking ("And Wittgenstein was a beery swine"). the absurdity of this mixing up of reality creates a certain degree of shock but is after a while regarded as funny.

Decomposing Composers[7]

The most funny thing about this song is probably the title itself. Both words contain the same lexeme "pose" and derivational morpheme "com-" but the use of different additional derivational morphemes gives the words an opposite position in meaning. While "decompose" stands for "to become bad or rotten" the semantic meaning of "compose" is the other way round: "produce something new".

The struggle between life and death is the topic of this song. It's an ironical discourse about the misfortune of composers that their music lives on but they do not. This song is sung in a cockney dialect along with a light classical music. Most of the verses are built up as antitheses "Beethoven's gone, but his music lives on" and within these you also can find chiasms like "You can still hear Beethoven, but Beethoven cannot hear you". Some of the antitheses are built by the use of chiasms: "1880 going to parties, no fun any more 1881". Throughout the whole song the terms "death", "dead" or "die" are

hardly ever used. Most of the time they appear as euphemisms "not still alive" and sometimes expressed with the help of ornate metaphors: "Elgar doesn't answer the door" or "Mozart don't go shopping no more".

I think that the listener immediately accepts the attempt of being humorous when hearing this song. The basis of humour is the play on words and the semi-indifferent attitude towards the misfortune of the composers mentioned. This song represents a multi-layered kind of humour: the topic compared to the dialect of the singer and his choice of words, too, are extremely funny.

Every Sperm Is Sacred[8]

This song is taken from the film "The Meaning of Life" and tells us about the miracle of birth in countries of the third world (i. e. Yorkshire). With this song a father explains his children, whom he has to sell because they are too many in number, why he is not allowed to use contraceptives. The song is an allusion to this topic but also to the overpopulation in the third world countries. It is also an ironical statement on the beliefs of the Catholic Church.

There are a lot of ironical and sometimes sarcastic remarks about church: "You don't have to have a great brain [...] You're a Catholic from the moment Dad came..." The authors also use a lot of hyperboles which can even be seen in the title "Every Sperm Is Sacred". This is extremely exaggerated because out of about a million just one sperm can impregnate the egg cell - the others die. Another example for this would be the corpse admitting that even his sperms are needed. To the lyrical aspects of the song can be said that a lot of anaphors are used, lines with the same word or phrase ("There are...", "Every sperm is...").The rhyme scheme of the lyrics is quite regular. Most of the verses especially the chorus show an end rhyme scheme in the form of "abab". Something which may be interesting is the lacking of metaphors which creates the impression of a kind of "straight forward" character. This is also emphasised by the use of simple and minimal vocabulary. This and the fact that most parts of the song are sung

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by choirs conveys the feeling of listening to a religious song. But this feeling is destroyed when hearing the lyrics and concentrating on its content.

The song does not shock at all and it amuses the listener with its high degree of plausibility. The listener recognises and accepts the attempt at humour made by the authors.

3.2. The Familiar
Always Look on the Bright Side of Life[9]

In the final scene of the film "The Life of Brian" the crowd of the crucified sing this song. It is a satire on death and dying. In the film the singer mocks about Brian's anxiousness of facing his death. The statement the song makes is that life is bad and death turns out things for the best (see first verse). The ironical thing is that, if you have a closer look at Brian's life, the statement is completely true even if Brian does not have this feeling about it.

Some of the most interesting features of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" are the metaphors used to paraphrase the bad times short before death. All of them have quite an ornate character: "When you're chewing on life's gristle" or "When you're feeling in the dumps". This song is intended to make coming to terms with the fact of dying easier. An example for this is the last verse and the use of the epiphor "...nothing".

The switch of the word "bright" into "right" in the chorus should encourage the listener to lead a life full of fun - as the singer who is a very happy character, did. And in the end he even enjoys being crucified: "Enjoy it - it's your last chance anyhow. So always look on the bright side of death." The light music, the whistling and the constant use of end rhymes also underline the happy sound of this song.

The funny thing about this song is the making the punishers look stupid even when the punished are faced with death. They make fun of their misfortune and give the situation an absurd turn. First the listener (spectator) may be surprised but this feeling will soon turn into amusement.

<u>Money Song</u>[10]

This song is intended to be a parody on banking and extremely rich people. It was first to be seen in an episode of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" and the background for it is a BBC report on the financial system during which one of the financiers gets mad of luck and starts to sing and dance.

The entertaining character of the music which is in contrast to the normally serious topic is emphasised by the constant use of alliteration: "forty thousand French francs in my fridge" or "my dollar bills would buy the Brooklyn Bridge". This, the happy music and the regular use of end rhyme give the song a high degree of liveliness - which stands in contrast to the boring work of bankers. But apart from the happiness there are some sarcastic remarks concerning the poorer people or those who do not show such an interest in money. This is done by the use of slang words. "Some people say it's folly, But I'd rather have the lolly". The term "lolly" is a slang word for money. Another sarcastic advice for these people are the following lines: "Everyone must hanker / For the butchness of a banker". In slang "butchness" stands for "appearance" and the singer is not at all concerned about being addressed with such an informal expression. The allusion to the communist way of life in the lines: "You can keep your Marxist ways / For it's just a phase" also adds to this theory.

The basis for the humour in this song is on the one hand the clever play on words and on the other hand the exaggerated picture of a stereotypical banker. Seen in connection with the film scenes it breaks with the norms which are set up for a television report and hits the audience unexpectedly. The entertaining factors are the vivid music and the extremely fluid lyrics.

<u>I'm so Worried</u>[11]

"I'm so Worried" is an allusion to people who react on everything too oversensitively. It is an ironical discourse about their constantly being doubtful about everything. Although the song at first sight gives a positive impression because of its enticing music

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[9]see p. 19.
[10]see p. 19.
[11]see p. 20.

and the light classical touch of the singer's voice both things soon get on your nerves in a way people of this kind usually do.

The chorus-line of the song, although it is a hyperbole, gives a clear characterisation of such people: "And I'm so worried about the luggage retrieval system they've got at Heathrow." The constant use of anaphors ("I'm so worried...") emphasises the song's nerve-racking character. The immediate repetition of the word "worried" in the fifth verse supports this impression. A nice lyrical feature is the use of rhetorical questions in the last three verses. "And I'm so worried about whether I should go on or whether I shouldn't just stop." This and the pause of the music help on the one hand to make the song interesting and the listener pay attention to it again and on the other hand makes it easier to continue with it. But when using this trick a second time it develops into another nerve-racking feature. When hearing the "poor" singer breaking into tears at the end of the song the listener can even laugh at him. This laughter will be more of a sarcastic kind than show that the listener is feeling sorry or any kind of sympathy for that person.

This song targets the subconscious of the listener and may even create certain feelings of hate or rage towards the singer - but this depends on how strong the nerves of the listener are. The exaggeration of the behaviour of such persons indirectly affects the reaction of the listener. But at the end of the song he can give free rein to his feelings by laughing - for what reason ever.

3.3 The Unfamiliar
Eric the Half a Bee[12]

The reason why I finally decided to place this song within the category "The Unfamiliar" is its philosophical touch. Because it has no real content it creates the feeling of a philosophical approach to nonsense.

The most obvious linguistic feature is the play on words: the use of the homophones "a bee" and "to be". This gives some lines a very weird character. ("But can a bee be said to be") Another example for this is the homophonic character of the expression "semi-carnally" and the name of the literary critic "Cyril Connolly" which appears at the

very end of the song and is intended to increase the confusion of the listener. The frequent use of these two words also provides a regular end rhyme in the form of "aa". The rhyme scheme is supported by internal rhyming ("Half a bee, philosophically,") and lets the lyrics sound very fluent. Apart from these techniques the author also uses some other lyrical elements to maintain the philosophical character of the song. One is the use of a chiasm in the first two lines: "Half a bee, philosophically, must ipso facto half not be." These lines are also a paradox which is solved by the following two lines: "But half a bee, has got to be, vis a vis, its entity." In the second verse a rhetorical question is posed which has also paradoxical features and it refers to the previous verse. Another linguistic technique is paraphrasing the term "a bee" by using the expression "hive employee". This is done to keep the rhythm of this line flowing.

   For decoding the humour in this song the listener has to abandon the "informational function" of language. When he concentrates on the music and the playing on words he surely will be amused by the absurdity of the whole thing.

The Meaning of Life[13]

This song is the background music to the animated opening scenes of the film with the same title. The song is a parody on the philosophical and scientific approaches towards this topic. It poses a lot of questions man asks himself but it do not give any answers. It just refers to the film which is normally to come afterwards.

   The most common linguistical feature of this song is the use of alliteration. In nearly every second line an example can be found: "Is God really real," or "While scientists say we're just simply spiralling coils, of self-replicating DNA." The anaphor "Is.." plus a changing following question gives the lyrics a compact character and therefore it does not matter that there is a minimum content. The use of regular end rhyme and the added line "For tonight it's the meaning of life" at every end of a verse emphasises this impression. In the last verse the immediate repetition ("And what, what, what, what do we fear?") should cause some increased tension before the final announcement: "Well, çe soir, for a change, it will all be made clear, for this is the Meaning of Life - c'est le sens de la vie". By using French vocabulary - at first just phrases and finally a whole

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sentence - the singer intends to sound more intellectual and to stress the importance of the topic. A similar impression should be created by the upper-class like pronunciation of the word "real" in the phrase "Is God really real,".

The problem is that the song, without the animated "video clip", is less funny than it could be. But after a closer look at the lyrics the sarcastic side-swipes ("Or perhaps we're just one of God's little jokes,") on people who see men as superior beings dispel this feeling immediately. Several listeners will surely find different points to laugh at, and this shows that each listener has to work out the jokes on his own.

3.4. The Unspeakable

Penis Song (The not Noel Coward Song)[14]

The "Penis Song" is intended to be a parody on Noel Coward, as the subtitle suggests. Noel Coward is an English playwright, who writes plays in which he makes fun of the upper-class. Besides this he is also a composer of witty songs which, compared to the "Penis Song", are written in a similar tune. Originally this song is part of the film "The Meaning of Life" where it is played within an entertainment programme in an upper-class restaurant.

Though the song is very short a lot of linguistic features can be found in it. Maybe most offensive for some listeners is the wide range of more or less common terms for the male sexual organ: the penis. A collection of British and American slang words form the content of the song. I want to try to explain the meaning and the origin of these expressions[15]. The words are as follows: "penis", "dong" (an American slang term for penis, especially a large one), "stiffy"(erected penis), "dick"(a slang term for penis), "tadger", "prick"(slang term for penis, also used for a contemptible or ineffectual male person), "Willy" (a euphemism for penis, used particularly by or to children), "John Thomas" (a British euphemism for penis), "Percy", "cock" (a vulgar slang term for

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[14]see p. 20.
[15]Robert Goldenson, Kenneth Anderson, The Wordsworth Dictionary of Sex, Wordsworth Reference, Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994.

penis). But also metaphors as "your wife's best friend" are used and the most ornate is "your one-eyed trouser snake".

Another lyrical method is the use of oxymorons, which is adding two terms of opposing connotation to one expression: "Isn't it awfully nice" or "Isn't it frightfully good". By using alliteration the author tries to make some lines of the song sound more fluent: "You can wrap it up in ribbons, You can slip it in your sock,". The exaggerated pronunciation of the letters "r" and "s" show this intention.

Other linguistic features are supposed to increase the offensive character of the song. The first is the double meaning of the expression "to toss off", which is used in the spoken introduction. On the one hand it stands for "to produce quickly" and on the other hand it is a British slang term meaning "to masturbate". The second is the hyperbolical use of the adjectives "swell" and "divine" in the lines "It's swell to have a stiffy, It's divine to own a dick,". Both are related to concepts which are normally not connected with the very informal topic of the song. The term "swell" means "excellent, first-rate" and is normally associated with the upper-class. "Divine", in informal use, stands for "wonderful, lovely" but it also implies a certain connection to the church or God. Finally, the third lyrical method is the use of emphasis in the following lines: ""So three cheers for your Willy or John Thomas, Hooray for your one-eyed trouser snake". These lines ridicule the song itself but the serious explanation at the very end of the song does the same thing in a more effective way: "But don't take it out in public, Or they will stick you in the dock, And you won't come back."

The song is a parody on Noel Coward's compositions. Its tune matches the one of his songs but the lyrics break with the listener's previous knowledge by entering the "forbidden territory" of obscene language. He is more amused by the unexpected content of the song than he is shocked. The play on words and the sometimes funny collection of synonyms for the term "penis" could reduce the offensive character of the song and in the end the listener will laugh about it. By using these words the author is breaking a taboo and this creates a strangely liberating feeling in the listeners, too.

4. Remarks

To summarise it may be said that most of Monty Pythons humour is connected with common topics or facts: On the one hand there is the making fun of well-known personalities and on the other hand Monty Python ridicules situations of every day life.

Most of the songs contain forms of multi-layered humour which is due to the fact that besides the lyrics the music is an important factor of the funniness. It can dominate the song as in "Oliver Cromwell", it can be an allusion to something ("Penis Song") and finally there is its intention to match the topic ("Decomposing Composers") or simply to entertain("Money Song"). But although the tune is an important part of a song the lyrics and the singer's voice are to the fore.

Analysing humour in songs can be compared to interpreting poetry. The basis for most of the stylistic devices is linguistics (morphology, semantics, sociolinguistics) and it therefore is an important part of Monty Python's humour. Nearly every song of the record and all songs I have analysed contain certain forms of play on words.

The psychological basis of humour in some of these songs is absurdity especially the mismatch with reality. But the entering of "forbidden territory" - the use of obscene language and slang - and the intention to surprise the listener also play an important role within Monty Python's world of humour.

In conclusion it can be said that the work on this topic was very interesting but apart from the findings I have come across in the field of linguistics there have also turned up other consequences. Because of the intensive work on the songs I can laugh more about some of them but it has also brought about other changes: I cannot laugh about songs which I liked before. But on the whole I believe that I now have got a clearer picture of Monty Python's techniques of humour.

 Lyric sheet 1

Lyric sheet 2

<u>Lyric sheet 3</u>

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