

# Carabinieri?

**Giovannantonio Forabosco**

Centro Ricerca Umoreismo  
[g.forabosco@tin.it](mailto:g.forabosco@tin.it)

## Abstract

*Research was conducted using a series of light bulb jokes (Forabosco 1994). The original target of the jokes were the Poles, retargeted into “carabinieri” in Italy. A question is advanced: why carabinieri? An enlightening answer comes from comparative sociology.*

*Keywords: comparative sociology, light bulb jokes, ethnic humour.*

“A comparative sociologist and a *carabiniere* walk into a bar”.

There is no need to be a humour researcher to know that this line sounds like the beginning of a joke. However, this is not the case. To our knowledge, no events, in jokes or in reality, have ever been divulged, or recorded, involving these characters in some sort of a joint venture. So, what is the connection? Let us proceed with order.

The carabinieri are the state police, or—to be more precise—the military state police (which, among other things, distinguishes them from *vigili* or policemen). The name comes from the term *carabina*, the carbine which is the typical rifle with which they were armed.

When in search of some appropriate texts to be used in an experimental study (Forabosco 1994), three jokes were found to be in line with the aim of the research:

(A) How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Five. One who goes on a table to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table.

(B) How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb?

One hundred. One who goes on a table to hold the light bulb and 99 to turn the ceiling.

(C) How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Five. One who goes on a table to hold the light bulb and four to spray deodorant all around.

The jokes here are presented in the English version, whereas those actually employed were in Italian where the “Poles” were retargeted as “*carabinieri*” given the correspondence of the “stupidity” stereotype, and the popularity of carabinieri jokes in Italy at that time.

The focus of the study was to establish whether there was a preferable sequence of presentation, in order to obtain the best humorous effect. The jokes were presented randomly to

the subjects, and the main conclusion was that the most effective order was the one reproduced above.

The results were worthy of consideration, and they were interpreted in the light of the GTVH (Attardo & Raskin 1991) and of the Incongruity resolution model (Suls 1972). The main factors which appeared to have a role were the increase of perceived incongruity (i.e., turning the table, turning the ceiling), and the shift to a different Script Opposition (from clever/stupid to clean/dirty—and hence malodorous, which, by the way, is not a property involved in the carabinieri stereotype as such).

An issue that was not at the time addressed, and remained in the background, was why the perception of carabinieri was affected by the stupidity stereotype? What could possibly be the reason for the wave of jokes that were (and still are?) very popular and familiar within every segment of the Italian population, practically with no age, gender, education, or any other relevant variables making any difference?

There were no satisfactory explanations available. The most common ones were expressed in terms of political power, resentment and aggression. The *carabinieri* are representative of the State, so mocking them would be a way of releasing the negative, rebellious feelings against power, rulers, bureaucracy, not to mention taxation and fines for whatever reason. Yet, this explanation was on the one hand lacking in specificity, and on the other hand incorrect. To begin with, policemen are also in a similar condition of representing the institution, its power and its negative aspects. Although some jokes have also regarded their category, there is no comparison in the number and the spread of jokes. In addition, *carabinieri* are also perceived positively socially as they are generally appreciated as a strong and capillary shield against crime. Many, from different political sides, also see the *carabinieri* corps as a warrant and a stronghold for democracy. Therefore, jokes do not seem to reflect any basic negative attitudes towards them and their presence in Italian social life and culture.

An analysis, coming from abroad, proposed a more articulated model, providing some hints that are crucial to a fuller comprehension of the phenomenon. In his *Ethnic Humor around the World*, Christie Davis (1990) compares jokes from many different countries, and makes some very revealing observations.

The first key finding is that many, if not most carabinieri came from the south of Italy, and that was particularly true in the past. “*Terrone*” (from “*terra*”, land/soil/terrain) is the name to label someone from the south of Italy in a derogative way. The reference is to a set of characteristics such as peasant, poor, ignorant, and the like. These features also include stupidity. There is also a more general stereotype involved that is typically ethnic in nature—the common and worldwide distributed scheme “we superior/they inferior”. Curiously enough, also southern people seem to be fond of *carabinieri* jokes. One reason may be that whatever the motive for generating them, they started to circulate independently from the “*terroni*” stereotype and were a new, autonomous one.

This geographical and cultural component is a first and important factor, but also another dimension needs to be explored.

Not only did the *carabinieri* come from the south. From the 1950s and for a few decades a great number of southern Italians migrated to the north in search of work. Even though some *carabinieri* did not come from the south, the stupidity allegation applied to them too with no discrimination. In a masterpiece of Italian classic movies, *Pane, amore e fantasia*, directed by Pietro Comencini in 1953, the *carabiniere* Pietro Stelluti is in love with “*la bersagliera*”, a very attractive, lively, young lady played by Gina Lollobrigida. The story is located in a small village in central Italy, not far from Rome. Stelluti comes from a northern region, Veneto. He is a reserved person, a little shy, not very talkative. He is not stupid at all. What is of interest here is that he actually looks stupid to the villagers. His way of speaking with a different accent, his

manner of acting and his politeness compared to the rather rough villagers, made him appear odd and goofy. Stupidity was in the air.

The *carabiniere* Stelluti fits perfectly into the picture portrayed by Christie Davies. In particular, as Davies notes about the nature of the relationship between the language of joke-tellers and that of their butts, the language spoken is the same, however those targeted speak “a distinctive and ‘provincial’ version of the joke-tellers’ language” (Davies 1990: 52).

Moreover, also the immigrant component is to be considered. The general phenomenon is associated with the complexities of adapting to a different environment, culture, and way of living. In the convincing view of Christie Davies, the Poles as the typical target for stupidity jokes in the USA can be accounted for in this perspective. This also applies to *carabinieri*. They frequently moved hundreds of kilometres from their homes in order to work in very different cultural, linguistic, and traditional realities, often much more diverse from what would be expected within the same country. A difficulty of understanding customs and rules, words and habits, put them in the condition of acting and looking funny and hence eliciting the “ha ha!” reaction from the local population.

All of the above did not actually seem to have any real negative influence on the general respect for the corps. The principle implied being: jokes are jokes, not to be taken literally, let alone seriously.

So, how many comparative sociologists does it take to analyse light bulb jokes? One. It is with gratitude that we acknowledge Christie Davies for helping Italians to understand the why and wherefores of their own jokes.

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