

TARGETS OF ESTONIAN ETHNIC JOKES WITHIN THE THEORY OF ETHNIC HU- MOUR (CH. DAVIES)

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Abstract

The article aims to validate the main presuppositions of the theory of ethnic humour (see first and foremost Davies 1990, but also Davies 1987, 1991, 1998, 1999, 2002) in contemporary Estonian joke material. The author will pose hypotheses which will contest Davies' conclusions on regularities in ethnic humour. Davies' conclusions are largely built on the main binary oppositions and anecdote scripts manifest in mainly British humour tradition and the analysis of their social and societal factors, though he also analyses jokes about Jews (Davies 2002), briefly touches upon the ethnic humour (or, to be more precise, the lack of it, Davies 1998) of the Japanese and draws parallels from the entire English-speaking humour area (the anecdotes of the British, Welsh, Scots, Irish, Americans, Canadians, and Australians). Davies has not studied Eastern European jokes in greater length (except for Polish humour, which he introduces in comparing the American anecdotes about the Poles in Poland or among the Polish immigrants in the United States). This study aims to add to Davies' theory of ethnic humour valuable comparative and additional material on joke scripts, characters and the potential reasons behind their being chosen in non-English-speaking (and a politically more turbulent) culture area.

Keywords: ethnic humor, theories, scripts, postsoviet.

Material

The main source of the study is the database of Estonian anecdotes, compiled during 1996-2004 (and regularly updated), which includes material from the 1960s to the present day (available at <http://www.folklore.ee/~liisi/o2>). Ethnic jokes of the period 1960-1990 originate in two main sources - anecdote collection *Naeruga eilsest* compiled by Jüri Viikberg and jokes collected by Luule Krikmann in the Soviet period. The material is not very abundant (the total of 2,800 texts), but it is quite representative of the whole period. Since the year 1996 jokes have been collected and archived from the Estonian-language Web (the collection of the jokes was initiated by A. Krikmann and continued by L. Laineste). The Internet material of the 1990s constitutes a homogeneous and rich corpus (the total of approx. 34,500 texts). The material includes many duplicates and owing to literally iden-

tical copies the number of the Internet texts of some joke entries reaches up to 20 texts. In addition to these two corpora of material the analysis included jokes of stupidity and cleverness from the folk humour collections compiled in the 1890s by Mattias Johann Eisen. In the preliminary stage ethnic folk humour was separated from the material of the period and systematised according to character(s) and topics, thus resulting in the material corpus of ca 4,000 ethnic jokes and anecdotes, constituting the source of this study.

The theory of ethnic humour

The predominant and most widely known theory of ethnic humour attempts to discover societal regularities in the anecdote traditions of different countries by contextually describing jokes. Professor Christie Davies, author of this theory, has posed the main arguments in his article *Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries*, published in 1982. In the following monographs (1990, 1998, 2002) and numerous articles on ethnic humour (1987, 1991, 1999, 2003) he elaborates on and expands the empirical range of the theory. His approach is based on Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), or to be more precise, on the arguments connected with ethnic humour on binary oppositions. While Raskin merely described the main binary oppositions (providing examples mostly from the Jew humour), Davies explores the situations where the scripts apply - for example, he has discovered that the most common opposition *stupid - clever* is applied under particular circumstances in the social reality of two ethnic groups concerned.

Davies aims to describe the regularities of the emergence and spread of ethnic anecdotes and employs comparative method in his study. He looks for the links between main scripts and social facts, such as, for example, modern society's hesitance in regarding people's primary actions such as working, eating and drinking, sexual life and warfare. Issues related to these actions are present in more or less all societies; the societies where these are absent also lack the corresponding jokes (e.g. jokes about alcohol are missing in Muslim and Jewish jokelore).

Davies (1990) claims that anecdote traditions of different countries are governed by certain rules determining the ridiculed qualities and ethnic group. There are implicit cultural models, configurations of social situations, which cause the production of similar anecdotes (i.e. those based on similar scripts) in different countries. These regularities should be manifest in the anecdote tradition of each individual culture, and are based on the presupposition that the joke centres on divergence from the norm and average. This is comprehensively demonstrated in the following table (Davies 2002: 12):

Human activity underlying the joke	Comically defective attributes displayed in opposed sets of ethnic jokes	
		1. Activity is not taken seriously enough 2. Butts of jokes are inept, heedless, reckless 3. Consequence is crass failure
Work	stupidity	canniness
Sexual behaviour	promiscuity	sexlessness
Consumption of alcohol	drunkenness	teetotalism
War	cowardice	militarism

Figure 1. Main oppositions in ethnic jokes.

In his monograph published in 1990, Davies draws conclusions on the addressing of the jokes with scripts of stupidity, canniness, and culture-specific characteristics.

Jokes in every country (or reasonably homogenous cultural and linguistic domain) have certain targets for stupidity jokes - people who dwell on the edge of that nation or domain and who are perceived as culturally ambiguous by the dominant people of the centre. In addition, they will likely be rustic people or immigrants in search of unskilled and low-prestige manual work. They are to a great extent similar to the joke-tellers themselves, share the same cultural background or even speak a similar or identical language.

As the counterpart of stupidity jokes, there exist jokes about canniness that usually depict unambiguous, well-integrated and economically successful group of people, either only locally known (e.g. the population of the Laihia (Laihela) village in Finland) or international (e.g. the Jews or Scots).

There are also more culture-specific jokes about ludicrous behaviour concerning militarism, alcohol consumption, sexual behaviour, etc. These jokes are based on the cultural background of the object of ridicule and the teller of the joke, and their attitude towards the problems with the areas mentioned.

Procedure

In order to determine whether similar tendencies can also be observed in the Estonian material, or they are different, an analysis was carried out on the Estonian ethnic jokes and anecdotes from the 1960s to present day. Davies' purely qualitative approach is supported by little statistical data, but displays brilliant background knowledge of the culture, history and social relations of the mentioned cultures. The present study, however, emphasises the quantitative, and partly also qualitative, comparative analysis. The anecdotes were grouped according to the ethnicity of the character(s) and also according to the characteristic that is being ridiculed; in some cases an anecdote mocked more than one characteristic. After determining the main tendencies on the popularity of the butts of the joke, an in-depth analysis was conducted to explore the possible social reasons behind it. In this study the historical-cultural analysis of jokes is restricted to the Estonian material.

Results and discussion

In the following the universality of the main postulates of Davies' theory of ethnic humour will be tested on Estonian anecdotes. Regularities underlying the use of basic scripts will be reviewed and the conditions and the choice of characters in the Estonian humour tradition compared. The study will observe who are ridiculed and the extent of ridicule in the Estonian jokes of stupidity and canniness, cowardice, alcohol consumption and sexual behaviour. The reasons behind the considerable differences in

the English-speaking and Estonian anecdote tradition will be analysed.

The most common and therefore the most universal script is the script of stupidity. Such anecdotes are easily adjustable to representatives of many cultures. A typical stupidity script lacks culture-specific information; however, Davies notes that stupidity jokes are not told about all cultures (1990: 40). The stupidity script is manifest in the following joke:

Do you know why a Chukchi never eats sour cream?
Because his head is too large to fit in the jar.
(*Collected by Henry Saar, 15.06.1996*).

Proceeding from Davies' argument it is predictable that if the Chukchi in the joke would be replaced with an Estonian, the Estonians would no longer consider the joke particularly funny, though it may remain funny for, say, the Latvians. Stupidity script is assigned to the ethnic groups, who according to Christie Davies can be characterised by the following qualities:

- (i) they are close neighbours of joke-tellers (inhabiting the periphery or neighbouring countries, immigrants, ethnic groups who have historically shared the territory, or people who have unjustly obtained power or become members of the social elite without proving themselves worthy, e.g. British aristocracy);
- (ii) their language and culture is often similar to that of joke-tellers
- (iii) joke-tellers consider them backward, provincial with strange archaic customs or habits.

In anecdotes, the centre and periphery (the centre tells jokes about people living on the periphery, but not the other way around), social classes (the classes higher in the social hierarchy tell jokes about classes beneath them), favourable and unfavourable economic situation (the wealthy tell jokes about the poorer) are being juxtaposed. Joke-telling is asymmetrical - that is, it only functions downward. Reciprocal symmetric joke telling is rare (cf. the analyses on the Scandinavian humour tradition: Gundelach 2000; Kvideland 1983). Davies provides a list of "stu-

pid” ethnic groups of 28 countries, discovering that all or some of the three rules apply to all these countries (pp 52-53). Depending on the attitude of joke-tellers, the stupidity script is often associated with more specific qualities, such as eccentric clothes, shoes, personal hygiene or eating habits. These generalisations also apply to political jokes (p. 82).

Hypothesis 1: The traditions of all cultures include stupidity-jokes about another ethnic group who share the same territory or live in the neighbouring area, who speak a similar language and who are regarded as backward in some aspect.

The study of Estonian joke material reveals that the criteria of similar language, though with dialectal idiosyncrasies, and peripheral living place apply best to the Estonian dialectal groups (the Setu, inhabitants of Saaremaa and Hiiumaa, inhabitants of the western coast, etc.) Dialectal differences do exist even today, but mocking of ethnicity is missing. In modern jokes, all kindred groups have merged into a common group of “Estonians”. In the following I will observe which ethnic groups (in addition to kindred groups) would meet the criteria proposed by Davies.

Of the closest neighbours of the Estonians, the butts of the joke could well be the Finnish, as the Finnish and the Estonian language are both Balto-Finnic languages and are to a certain extent understood by both without previous knowledge of the language. The number of jokes mocking the stupidity of the Finnish is not very large; also, the Finnish anecdote lore about the Estonians is quite insignificant (Joon 2000). The reason might be that the Finnish live in an independent country of a considerably longer history, more democratic state system, and a considerably higher state of economy. For the Estonians the Finnish have had the image of the Big Brother, and the Estonians, indubitably, have been envious of their economic welfare. For the Soviet Estonians the Finnish had little characteristic features that would have inspired ridicule, also, at that time there were other, more “suitable” characters to make fun about (the Russians, etc.). The Finnish meet the first two criteria but they definitely lack the backwardness characteristic of the periphery.

Another ethnic group that may fit into the framework of Davies’ theory are the Russians, the largest immigrant minority in Esto-

nia. The Estonians and the Russians lack similarity in language and culture, and have in common geographical adjacency and historical relations. Humour lore about the Russians has always existed here. Jokes ridiculing the Russians are present already in the Eisen collections, where jokes about foreigners are otherwise relatively uncommon. Three-part anecdotes about an Estonian, a Russian and a German testing strength and wit were extremely popular in the school lore material collected in 1992. The popularity of anecdotes about the Russians is connected with the Estonian-Russian conflict on the territory of Estonia (archive material indicates that the number of jokes mocking the Russians grew significantly after the World War II events). The most popular butt of a stupidity joke in the Estonian material, however, is not a Russian, although the Russians come second after the Chukchi (see also Fig. 2). As I have already mentioned, a Russian as a butt of a stupidity joke meets only the first criterion, the condition of territorial adjacency. Newer jokes already contain allusions that an immigrant Russian, eager to integrate, may become a member of this not quite accepted minority of vague identity. The jokes ridicule their command of the Estonian language, their attempts to learn the language, but also the lack of understanding on the part of the Estonians in this matter, and the Estonians' inability or unwillingness to learn Russian in the Soviet time:

At a shop a Russian makes a strong effort to express himself in Estonian. The salesperson sees that he is having trouble with it and encourages him: "Speak in Russian, I will understand." "Nu net [Oh, no!]," the man replies, "we had to listen to your Russian language for fifty years, now you have to listen to our Estonian." (Bitman joke collection)

Over the last ten years Latvians have also become the objects of ridicule. The Estonians consider Latvians as economically worse off; the Latvians also meet the criterion of geographical adjacency. The only criterion they lack is the similarity of languages. The most exploited script is that of stupidity. At the same time the tradition has not (yet) become particularly active, as the database contains only a fraction of jokes about Latvians (the total of 43 jokes, whereas only one was recorded in 1990). The rest have been collected from active joke websites, such as the Sün-

kom Jokebook, and later also *www.delfi.ee/jokes*, where the newest and the most imminent anecdote creation is presented. The sites also seem to point to the rise in popularity of this topic.

Who are, then, the ethnic groups, which were ridiculed in the ethnic stupidity jokes in the Soviet period, and still are today?

The overview is presented in Figure 2.

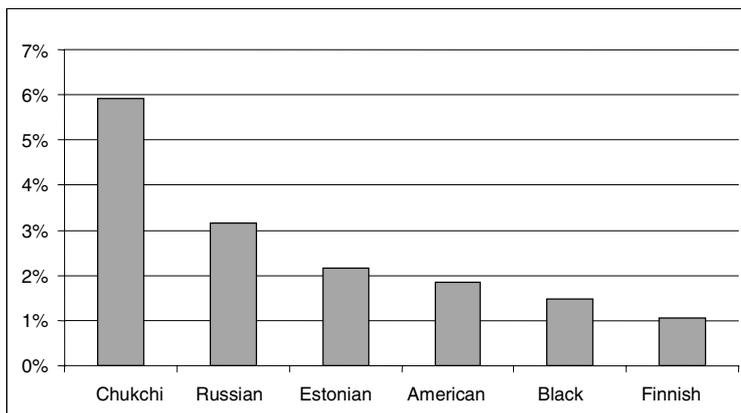


Figure 2. Characters of Estonian stupidity jokes by ethnicity (collected during 1960-2004).

Note: Characters who appeared in less than 1% of the jokes (ca 20 jokes or less) have not been included in the Figure.

The most popular stupid anecdote hero is a Chukchi. Draitser (1998) argues that many Chukchi jokes are in fact political. He argues that the ethnic group, which was introduced in the anecdotes in the 1970s, represents the then topical disappointment of all the members of the Great Fatherland in Communism, and attitudes to political leaders. A Chukchi is a simpleton, stupid in his honesty, who was introduced in the anecdotes for ridiculing the Soviet authorities. Certainly, the political nature of Soviet jokes cannot be overlooked, but the Chukchi anecdotes live on even after the political purpose is eliminated. Thus we may question whether it might still be considered a character meeting all the criteria of a stupidity script. The Chukchis live in the periphery, are considered backward (by people living in the centre).

The name of the ethnic group is catchy and associated with some Russian words of derogatory meaning (Draitser 1998: 82). Estonia was a member of the Soviet Union and most Estonians could speak Russian, thus the character was also understandable linguagewise. Even though candidates for the stupidity script characters could have been found from closer range, both geographically and language-culturally, the Estonians quickly accepted the Chukchis in their jokes. In the Soviet system, which was based on the pretence of merging all groups into one non-ethnic Russian-speaking Soviet people, a Latvian or a Finn was, at least in theory, not particularly closer to the Estonian than a Chukchi or an Evenk. The Estonians lacked the corresponding butt of mockery; furthermore, most anecdotes of the period originated in the other side of the eastern border. A Chukchi is still accepted as a butt of joke, probably owing to the lack of a better character, even though these anecdotes could easily be “translated” and ascribed to any other representative of an allegedly stupid ethnic group. For the present-day Estonians the Chukchis are almost mythical figures (much like the Smogarians are for the Americans), whom nobody has ever seen, and who may not even exist, but who are commonly known as being incredibly stupid (Tuisk 1995).

Other characters presented in Figure 2. (except for the Finnish and the Russian, to some extent) do not meet some of the criteria for the stupidity script. The Blacks are high up in the list most probably because of the general popularity of racial jokes, which, among other things, mock their ability to cope in a civilised society; another explanation for that may be the exotica, their origin from a distant, unfamiliar world, which Davies does not mention in his theory. The majority of the jokes about the stupid Americans deal with the ignorant behaviour of American tourists while visiting a foreign country. The Finns barely exceeded the 1% line (37 anecdotes), but the jokes about them are most consistently based on the stupidity script, whereas stupidity jokes constitute only a small fraction among the jokes about all the other ethnic groups in the list. Interestingly though, the Estonians themselves are vastly popular in stupidity jokes, and show themselves as stupid.

Thus we may agree that there are non-specific stupidity script jokes in the Estonian humour lore, but no fixed or commonly known objects according to the criteria proposed by Davies (such as the Irish for the British, Poles for the Americans, or Belgians for the French), especially after the 1990s when the Chukchis began to lose their popularity. Potential objects that may pass with concession (the Finns, Russians, Latvians, kinsfolk) probably do not classify as stupid enough for the Estonians. Therefore, the criteria for choosing a stupidity joke characters proposed by Davies operate in the Estonian material only to a certain extent.

Another popular script is canniness, which according to Davies is attributed to more carefully chosen ethnic groups. An ethnic group is considered canny, if

- (i) they are considered unreliable and strange, even though they have completely assimilated into the society of joke-tellers;
- (ii) they are linked to stereotypes of being stingy, cunning businessmen;
- (iii) they have been successful even after starting from a low position and owe their achievements to strict Protestant ethic or extreme thriftiness.

Here, Davies does not differentiate between stinginess and cunningness, and the qualities do have overlap, even though the calculated economising of the Jews is principally different from, say, the Gothamite stinginess of the Gaborvians. Davies draws the line where stinginess becomes to obstruct enjoying one's life. Canniness opposes stupidity particularly in that it is another negative extreme in a society worshipping material values. Canny ethnic groups, the most popular among them being the Scots, are unable to enjoy the fortune that has befallen on them, but remain the victims of the Protestant work ethic.

Jokes based on the canny script provide considerably less opportunities to replace a character than those ridiculing stupidity:

A Scot is reading a book, switching the light off for a moment and then switching it back on.

“What are you doing?” his wife asks him.
“I can turn pages also in the dark!”
(Eesti Päevaleht, Sept. 15, 1997)

For an Estonian the joke might work even when the character is replaced by a Gabrovian who is also commonly regarded as stingy. Even though the stinginess described in such anecdotes borders on the comical and the stupid, the joke would nevertheless not work with a typically stupid character Chukchi. Davies refers to the two most common scripts arising from the Protestant ethic as ridiculous extremes and sums these up paraphrasing an English proverb: “*All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy / All play and no work makes Jack a dull boy*” (1982: 389). In British jokes the canny script was not known before the end of the 18th century, i.e. before the beginning of urbanisation and industrialisation, and in Eastern Europe the script emerged even later (Davies 1998: 170). He also claims that an ethnic group that has been applied a canniness label is most likely “an endangered species”, vulnerable to unforeseen attack and persecution, especially in case the group is also viewed as dishonest, disloyal and conspiratorial.

Hypothesis 2: Each ethnic group holds jokes of the canny script about a group who have become adapted to the technological progress while moving from the periphery to the centre, but whose ability to enjoy life suffers under excessive eagerness.

Canny script is not very popular in Estonia. Also, it rarely occurs in older folk humour lore (among the people on the western coast of Estoni, the *Mulks* (inhabitants of the Viljandi County)), and the Jews are the only groups that could be characterised as such, and even they can not be considered as typically stingy, but are rather cunning and crafty. A *Mulk*, for example, occurs in jokes where the character is stingy as a Gothemite - he splits matches, lowers his trousers while sitting down so that they would not wear, etc. According to Davies’ theory, the jokes mocking even the most extreme thriftiness should take as its objects geographically close and culturally almost completely integrated groups. In Estonia, however, nearly all characters of the canny script have been borrowed from the jokelore of other countries (Fig. 3).

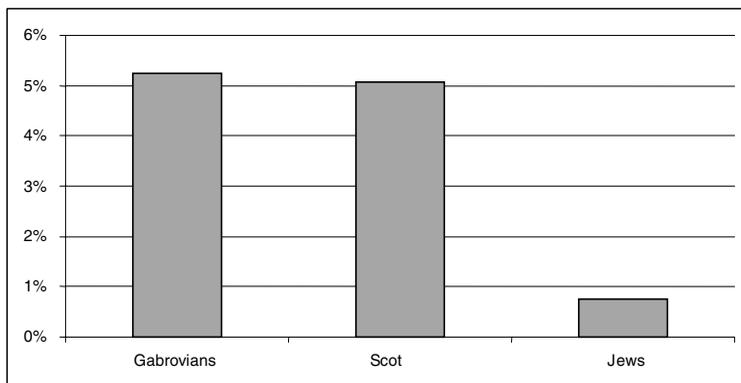


Figure 3. Characters of Estonian ethnic canny script jokes, collected during 1960-2004

The Estonian material contains no other groups that could be labelled as canny. The canny script is not subject to replacement of characters, which is very characteristic of (and often extremely arbitrary in) other scripts. Who could, theoretically, be a “local” canny character in the Estonian material? Davies’ three criteria could be met by Jews, if there were any left in Estonia after their emigration in the late 1930s and during 1940-1941; therefore canny jokes with a Jewish character constitute less than 1%. Moreover, Jew jokes speak of their cunningness and craftiness rather than extreme stinginess. The *Mulks* are also known as businessmen and men of property, but in modern anecdotes they are no longer butts of canny (or any other) jokes. It seems that even though the enterprise boom of the early independence period and the predicable workaholism of the Estonians are among the reflexive stereotypes, the Estonian jokes present the Estonians as stupid rather than canny. Thus modern jokelore includes no local ethnic groups that would meet all Davies’ three criteria, as the characters are mostly borrowed, universally known (Scotsmen and Jews). A *Mulk*, the character of the older humour lore, corresponds to Davies’ description of an ethnic group which might be considered as stingy among the local population, but the *Mulk* anecdotes are no longer told (contrary to, for example, the Laihia tradition in Finland, which is to some extent alive even today).

In addition, there are several specific ethnic scripts on militarism, erotomania or the lack of it, alcohol consumption, etc. Jokes of these scripts are based on the knowledge of the cultural back-

ground of a joke character. In general, culture-specific ethnic anecdotes contain the most valid information about the butt of the joke and established stereotypes: for example, considering southerners (Blacks, Georgians in Russia) as hypersexual and the Nordic people (e.g. Estonians, Sami) as hyposexual. Of course, the stereotypes have been exaggerated and modified for the purpose of comicality. Specific scripts follow most closely the principle of irreplaceability of joke character formulated by Raskin (1985: 207) and they can be applied only to a limited number of ethnic groups, and in some cases the suitable character is a representative of a specific ethnic group:

*Spain... Barcelona... high hotel building... fire...
A tourist is stuck on the hotel's highest floor and cries for help.
Helpful Spanish señors see the man in trouble, hold out a large red cloth in front of the hotel and shout to him: "JUMP!"
The tourist jumps.
"OLÉ!" shout the Spaniards and pull off the cloth right before landing.
(Meie naljaraamat, (<http://www.zzz.ee/joke/>), 17.06.1998, 13:47)*

Ethnic jokes of sexual content are difficult to analyse as beliefs about sexual conduct - evaluative (axiological, moral, etc.) markers assigned to an act of behaviour - are more difficult to describe than, say, attitudes towards working (in stupid and canny jokes). While the use of stupid and canny scripts marked the character of a joke as a loser, the evaluation aspect is less conspicuous in jokes about sexual behaviour, alcohol consumption and religion. The following joke, for example, may be understood either as recognition or mocking of the hypersexuality of a Georgian in Russia:

A Georgian's wife is standing at the window, looking out the window, all silent. The Georgian comes and asks his wife: Why are you so silent?
*The wife replies: Because I want to.
The Georgian: You want to...!!!! ... and you are silent!*
(Meie naljaraamat (<http://www.zzz.ee/joke/>), 6.11.1998, 18:42)

Specific ethnic scripts are used reflexively by ethnic groups who are the butts of the joke, and the motif of telling the joke is not necessarily self-criticism but may also be self-praise.

Hypothesis 3: The telling of ethnic specific jokes (about sex, cowardice, militarism, etc.) is based on the social, economical, religious or military historical background and the attitude of the joketeller to the problems related to these areas.

Raskin has categorised culture-specific ethnic joke scripts (1985), mentioning scripts of hyper- or hyposexuality, sexual deviance or ignorance, the size of genitalia, militarism, cowardice, politeness, alcoholism, etc. The most popular scripts in the Estonian tradition are those about the politeness of the British, the frigidity of British women, hypersexuality of the French, alcoholism of different ethnic groups. Jokes about militarism or eating habits are very rare in Estonia. Sexual behaviour, on the other hand, is frequently discussed in ethnic Estonian anecdotes:

Two Estonians are sitting by the camp fire.

“Christmas is nice!” says one of them.

Half an hour later, the other one replies: “Yes, Christmas is nice, but a woman is even nicer!”

Another half-hour later the first man replies: “Yes, a woman is better, but Christmas comes more often!”

(Meie naljaraamat (<http://www.zzz.ee/joke/>), 15.12.1997, 15:16)

Jokes about alcohol consumption either deal with teetotalism or excessive drinking, whereas the evaluation of the latter may also be ambivalent. On the one hand, alcohol is accepted in the western culture area and the ability to handle excessive amounts is respected, as it indicates to the masculinity and stamina of the drinker. It may even become a matter of honour, a part of ethnic identity. On the other hand, alcohol is a dangerous addictive substance, which causes many social problems and turns the drinker idiotic and comical. In the Estonian jokes being drunk is a quality attributed to the Finns and Russians, but also to cowboys, Irishmen and Estonians themselves:

Question: When is an Estonian man sober?

Answer: An Estonian man is sober as long as he can intelligibly articulate the word “mõmm”.

(www.delfi.ee/jokes, 27.08.2001, 20:32)

Alcohol jokes are never attributed to ethnic groups who consume it moderately (Japanese, Italians, French, etc.). Compared to this the topic of dirtiness in jokes depends more on the attitudes of

joke-tellers (e.g. the obsession with personal hygiene among the Americans, for example) and less on the actual qualities of the butt of the joke.

To conclude it can be said that while attempting to apply Davies' ideas to the Estonian material it becomes evident that the Estonians are most conscious about their alcohol consumption and sexual life; unfortunately, there are no evidence to prove this point, therefore the argument is bound to remain hypothetical.

Conclusion

Problems related to work, sexual behaviour, alcohol and security are to a greater or lesser extent common to all societies; the societies where these problems are missing also lack the corresponding jokes. If a problem exists, there will also be an ethnic group that can be ridiculed about it, whereas the character might be borrowed from some other culture. Davies' theory allows drawing parallels with the Estonian material, where the same motifs are present, even though the criteria for character choice proposed by Davies do not always apply.

How does the choice of characters of ethnic humour depend on social reality and whether it follows the same universals in the joke tradition of each ethnic group? Davies (1990 and elsewhere) seems to be on the right track in his conclusions about the Anglo-Saxon culture area. At the same time, the Estonian material includes tendencies and single phenomena which cannot be explained through the theory - for example, why the jokes are told upward, i.e. on the lower social and economical level, and in periphery (in geographical sense) jokes are made on ethnic groups higher up the social scale (e.g. Estonians about the Russians). History and cultural background (though western) is different in both cases. Estonia is not a country of old and stable democracy, with no established relations with its neighbours in the past and present. Kinsfolk are regarded as equal because the territory is small and local identity (at least in jokes) has disappeared a long time ago. In the Soviet period many anecdotes were borrowed from the east and constituted a shared Soviet humour tradition. According to some authors (e.g. Draitser 1998), the political nature of jokes of this period has ruled out other joke categories

(including ethnic humour). However, the Estonian material seems to indicate that the political basis of the jokes adds new dimensions, which should definitely be considered in the analysis and the search for regularities. Davies' generalisations which are mostly based on jokes in the Anglo-Saxon culture area and might apply to the ethnic humour of all countries fail to consider the possible political and historical idiosyncrasies between capitalist and socialist, closed and open, dictatorial or democratic societies.

Attribution of anecdote scripts and principles of character choice is explicated in the question whether any of the previously mentioned trends in the Estonian ethnic jokes are explicitly and unambiguously conditioned by the actual shifts in social reality. Greater variation of characters and the shift of the focus from kinsfolk to ethnic groups in more distant locations is a general tendency and can be explained by the expansion of horizons and social contacts by means of the Internet and other forms of media, visa freedom, frequent travelling, and the amount and increase of interaction at large. The growing number of jokes about the invasion of Finnish tourists in the post-independence period, for example, indicates to the ability of anecdotes to flexibly comment on the social situation and the changing stereotypes. At the same time the role of the European Union and the EU Member States in ethnic jokes is yet to develop. Anecdotes do not respond to reality very operatively, the jokes need some time to settle, but the reason may also be that there is nothing to ridicule about the EU. The most operative area of humour are false news-stories (one of the most active websites in the Estonian Web is the section of topical humour, available at www.delfi.ee/jokes), which also discusses the topic of Estonia's accession to the EU.

Davies' theory is founded on criteria for character choice of the most popular joke script - that of stupidity. In Estonia the stupidity script is mostly applied to the mythical and political Chukchis and the Russians, after Estonia's regained independence also the Estonians themselves, and to a lesser extent the Americans, the Blacks and the Finns. None of the ethnic groups, however, meet his criteria of geographical and linguistic closeness. Davies himself argues (from personal conversation, 2004)

that in the present day the choice of characters takes place on a more global level, and the Gothemites, immigrant Irishmen, etc. are no longer the only stupid characters in the British jokelore. This enables to disregard the criteria of geographical closeness and language similarities. Likewise, the third criterion, which presupposes that people in the centre should tell jokes about people in the periphery, those who are considered backward, outdated or lower on the social scale, may not apply, at least in the socialist society. In the Soviet period and also in the older layer of humour the mocking was reverse, having an upward direction, especially on the level of social position.

Another popular script makes fun of canniness. The Estonian jokelore lacks fixed canny characters of its own, and, most likely, the tradition of Scots jokes common to many countries is not based on the considerable size of Scottish community in each of these societies. These are borrowed jokes and characters. Borrowed ethnic characters, however, do not satisfy the historically, culturally and socially “proper” roles conditioned by Davies’ criteria for joke-tellers (e.g. the Scots are neither an immigrant group for the Estonians nor do they hold high positions in the Estonian society).

As to culture-specific jokes the hypothesis is difficult to prove or reject, because it is rather speculative even in Davies’ argumentation. The Estonians joke mostly about sexual extremities and alcohol problems, as the number of jokes on militarism, eating, dirtiness, etc. is considerably smaller. From here proceeds (following Davies’ argumentation) the conclusion that this reflects the Estonians’ concerns - the most problematic areas of life being sexual life and alcohol consumption. The Estonians do not “err” in attributing specific ethnic scripts, which are used, analogously to the humour traditions of other countries, in a rather universal manner (e.g. the character in a jokes of sexual content is often a Frenchman or a Georgian, etc.).

The Estonian lore constitutes a valuable comparative material, all the more so as the theory proposed by Davies cannot be entirely applied to the Estonian material (and most likely to the jokes of other post-Socialist countries). This contests the universality of Davies’ theory and adds a new dimension to the regularities discovered and proposed by him. Jokes are connected

with changes and events in social reality, but the connection is not universal and may differ in the joke tradition of countries of different cultural, political and economic background (i.e. different from the western world).

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Reference:

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