

Intangible Heritage in Transformation: The Case of Estonian Post-Socialist Jokelore¹

Liisi Laineste

The paper will describe the transformation of cultural heritage at the time of sharp societal changes with jokes as an example. Telling changes have taken place both after the 1940ies, during Soviet times, and after the regained independence in 1991. Not intending to describe the continuity or origin of texts, I will analyse some more popular joke scripts that existed back in the 1880ties and are still part of our jokelore, and some texts that are specific to one certain era, circulating only then or now. This will point out the (implicit) politics of cultural heritage – what survives as an active tradition and what disappears from everyday use. The most important factor here that regulates the process is the sense of identity and relevance. This will also throw light on the tensions inside intangible heritage between the local and the global. In order to be more specific, I will focus my presentation on only on ethnic jokes.

While describing the jokes and targets, I will also refer to a theory for ethnic humour proposed by Christie Davies from 1990ies on: to put it briefly, this is a proposedly universal set of rules of stupidity joke targets being from a culturally close society from the joke-tellers and / or sharing a similar language that is then considered to be funny, and / or characterized by asymmetricality, jokes being told in one direction only (for example French about the Belgians, US about Polish, England-Shotland-Wales about Irish, Canadians about Newfoundlanders etc.).

First let's look at the difference and change, and later draw conclusions about what this reveals about the underlying processes of cultural heritage. The sample material is taken from two sources: I studied 815 jokes collected and published in the late 19th century by JM Eisen, and for comparison, the material from a digital joke database consisting of about 40 000 Soviet and present Estonian jokes started in 1998.

Here are some similar jokes from the two periods:

A man from Hiiumaa complained to a man from Saaremaa that he had a terrible pain in his eyes. He had tried all manner of ways to cure it, but to no avail.

The Saare man replied : "You idiot! When I had toothache, I had my tooth pulled out, and the pain was gone in no time! You should have your eyes pulled out, and you'll see the pain go away immediately."

"I have a terrible pain in my eyes! What could I do about it?"

"Well, I had toothache last year."

"And what did you do?"

¹ * The research was conducted with the help of the ESF grant No 6759

"Pulled the tooth out!"

A Hiiu man had a job at the merchant's office for the summer season. Co-workers called him *rassnossik**. He thought this was a very fine and honorable name and when he went home he boasted: "Others work for the merchant for lifetime, and are still called by their first names! But I, who worked there only for a summer, was always called *rassnossik* – that shows you the kind of man I am!"

(*rassnossik – (est rus) delivery boy)

Petka got himself a trip to Miami beach. A week later, Tchapaev phoned him to see how he was doing. "It's great here," replied Petka. "Everybody likes me. The Americans even have a special pet name for me: they call me *son of a beach*."

Two men from Hiiu men found a gun. None of them knew what it was so they decided to investigate. One thrust the barrel into the other's mouth and said: "Mats, you blow into it, I'll press it in the middle!" He pulled the trigger, the gun went off, and filled Mats' mouth full of buckshot. "Mats, spit it out!" cries the other man. Mats can't spit out anything any more. Mats can't even move.

A monkey and a horse are taking a walk. They find a gun. The horse looks down the barrel, the monkey plays with the other end. The gun goes off, and the blows away half of the horse's head. The horse falls down and his mouth starts twitching. The monkey gets angry: "What's so funny? I got a bad fright!"

A Hiiu man often told his sons: "No need to blab!".

Once the two sons were fishing at the sea, and one of them drowned. The other came home, but said nothing.

After three days the father asked: "Where is Mats?"

Son answered: "Fell over board and drowned!"

Father asked: "Why didn't you tell us?"

Son replied: "But you said yourself: No need to blab!"

Two Estonians go to a pub. They line up 7 vodkas on the bar and start drinking.

In a while, the first Estonian says: "You know...".

The other interrupts him: "Listen, did we come here to drink or to talk?"

Two cabmen in Tartu are standing near the railway station. One of them sees the train coming: "Here it fucking comes!"

A passer-by, somewhat surprised, asks: "Who comes?"

The cabman replies: "Didn't I just fucking tell you, the fucking train, fuck it, is fucking coming!"

In an American Estonian family, wife and husband are arguing:

"I do not want to teach Estonian to my kids!", the wife says.

"Why not?" asks the baffled husband.

-“Because every second word is “fucking”! Juhan yesterday told me: Fucking walking, along the fucking road, I fucking looked, fucking something there, fucking shiny. Fucking gold? Fucking bent down to fucking touch it - fucking snot!”

Most obvious differences include the change in form and construction: long jokes have disappeared (though this is a thing that can be changing alongside with introduction of internet jokes – long lists and other non-oral jokes). We see here that the punch line is missing or spelled out, as an unnecessary elaboration. But there are also more intrinsic differences, some of which were also visible in the examples given above.

- Selection of joke targets has changed systematically: the main direction being from close > far (like neighbours and kinsfolk > faraway nations); specific > abstract (like ethnic characters > gender markers). This is also visible in the proportion in ethnic jokes throughout the years: 1880ies mostly ethnic, and compared with latter periods their share is declining.

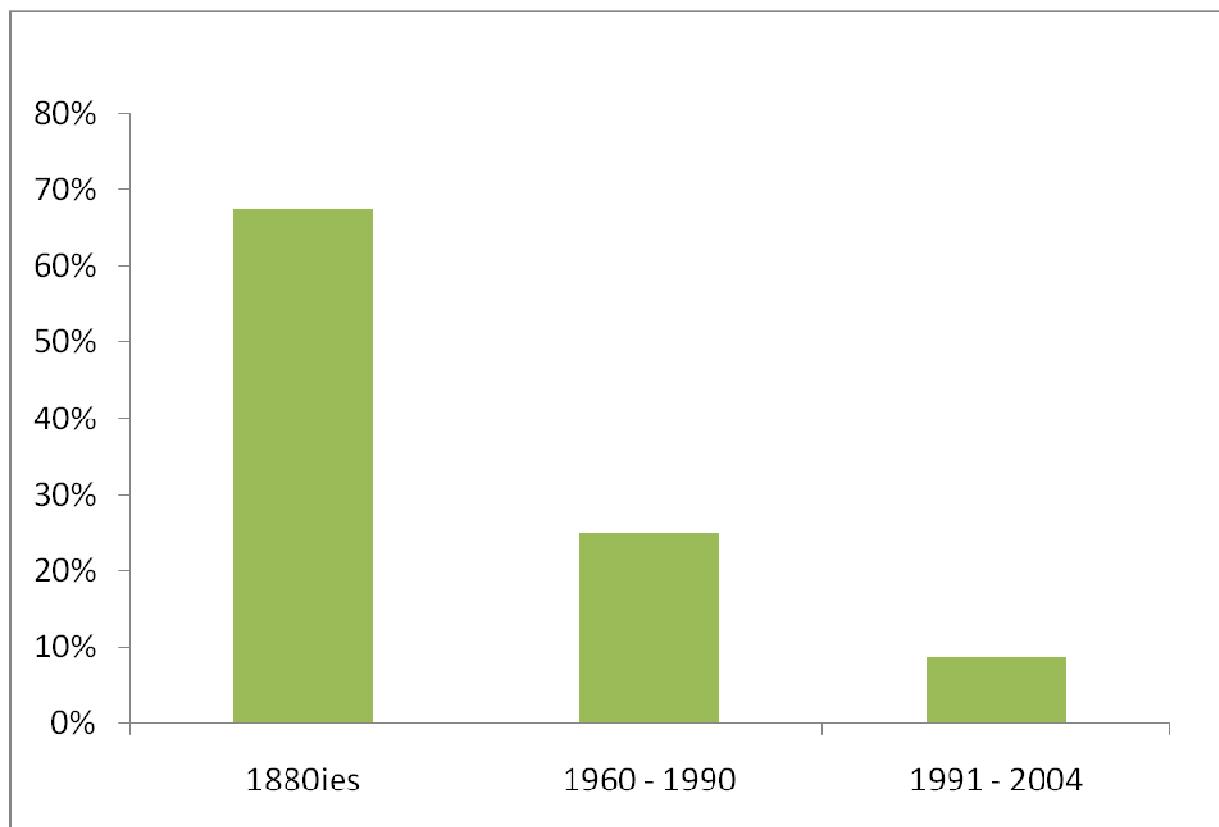


Figure 1. Estonian ethnic jokes, 1880-2004.

Other identity markers are replacing geographical-ethnic self- and other-positioning. Gender, vocation, more generalized national markers (Estonia instead of Hiiu), in some cases even animals.

- The new/punchlined Estonian jokes lack one and certain joke target a priori stigmatized as the most stupid nation on earth, being the impersonification of human folly. We can notice the emerging new targets from after 1990ies on Figure 2:

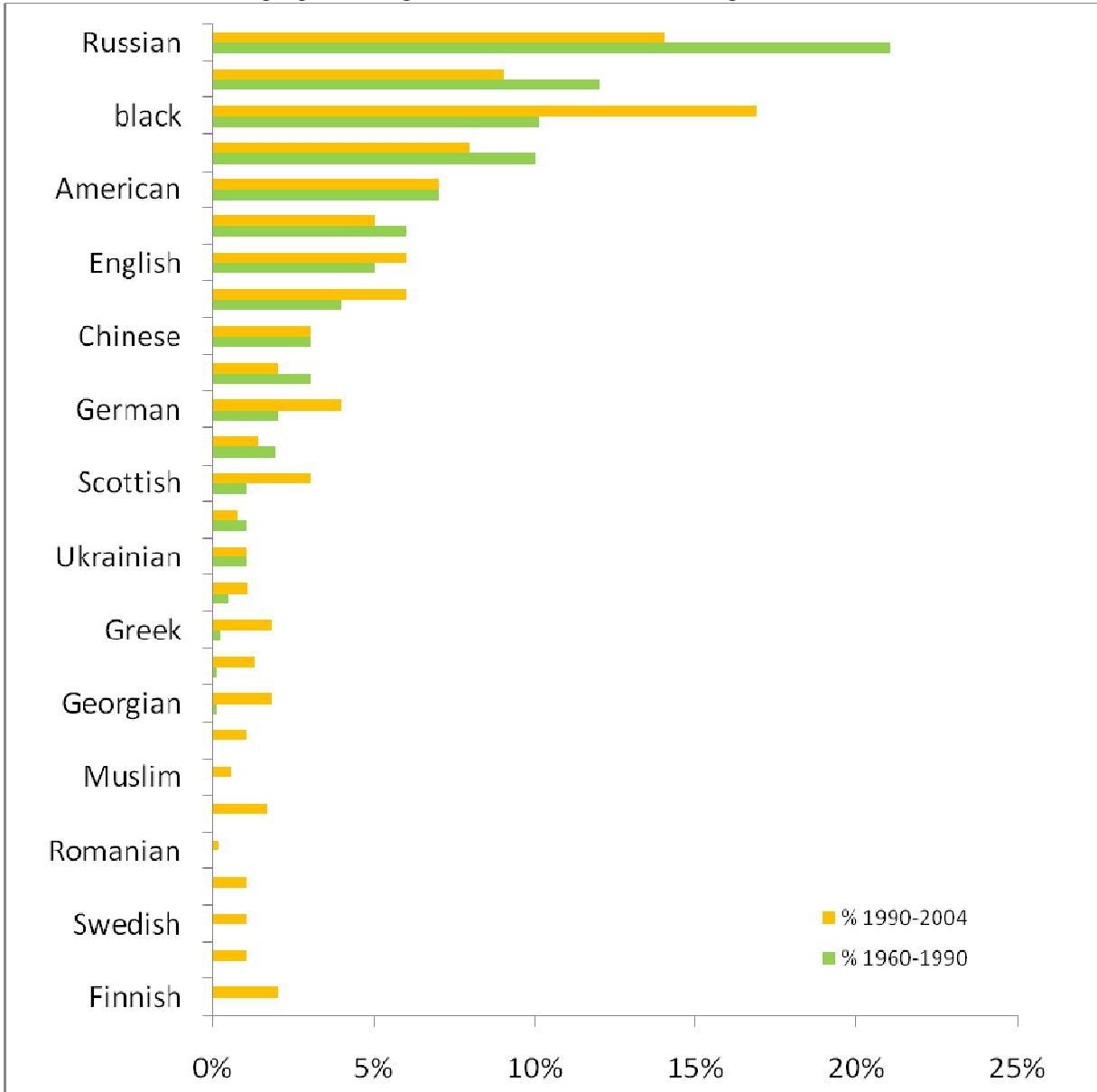


Figure 2. Targets of Estonian ethnic jokes in Soviet and post-socialist periods.

So first, there is globalization, a state of being open to all kinds of new joke targets. The old folk jokes, on the other hand, had quite a clear vision about the stupidity of the "stranger" who were to the largest extent kinsfolk from the islands and coastal areas, from southern Estonia with a distinctive dialect, and accidental immigrants like Russians, Jews and Gypsies (Figure 3).

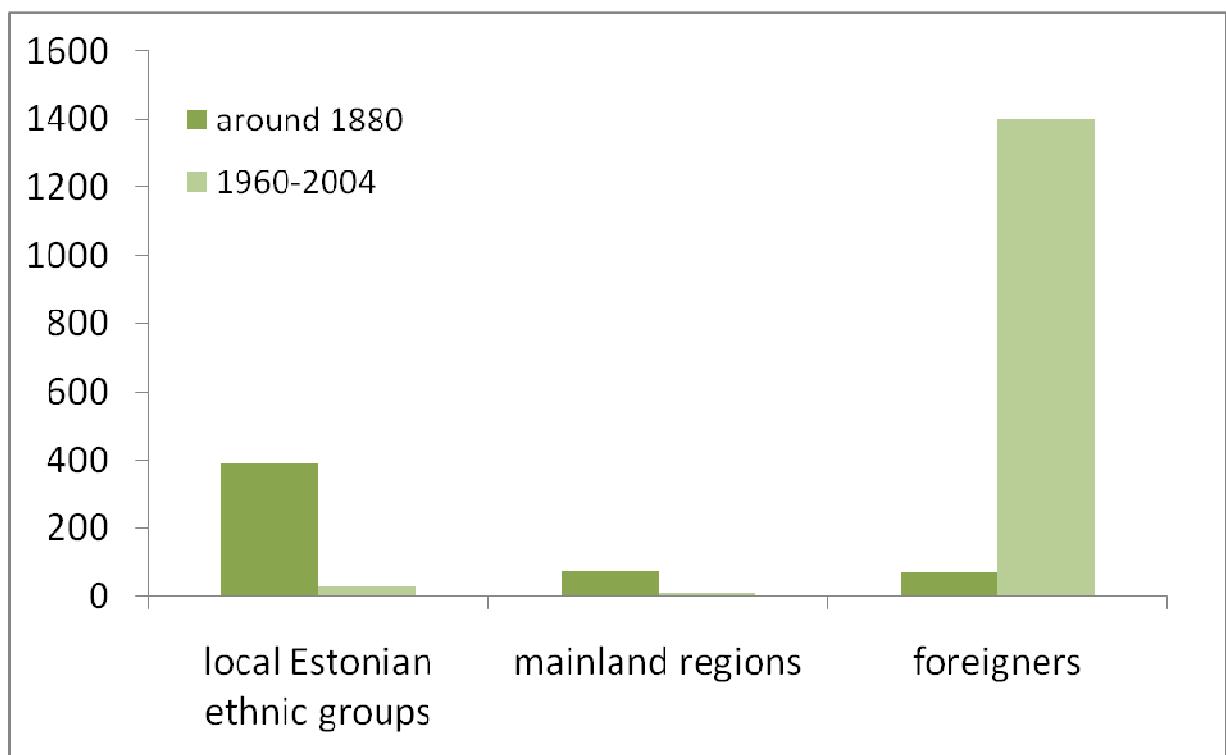


Figure 3. Targets of Estonian ethnic jokes in 1880ies and after 1960ies.

Not only was the choice of typical targets smaller, they also were from a geographically closer range.

- But what we see in the recent years is a strive towards a search for exactly the "own" national butts of stupidity jokes we were largely missing in the Soviet period. There is a rejection of the all-Soviet stupid characters – Chukchis, or targets of political-ethnic jokes like Russians. Besides being open for all kinds of new joke targets imported from the West, the Estonians are searching for their own targets, as an example of localization/searching for specificity. We can notice a rise in the popularity of close neighbours as targets on Figure 4:

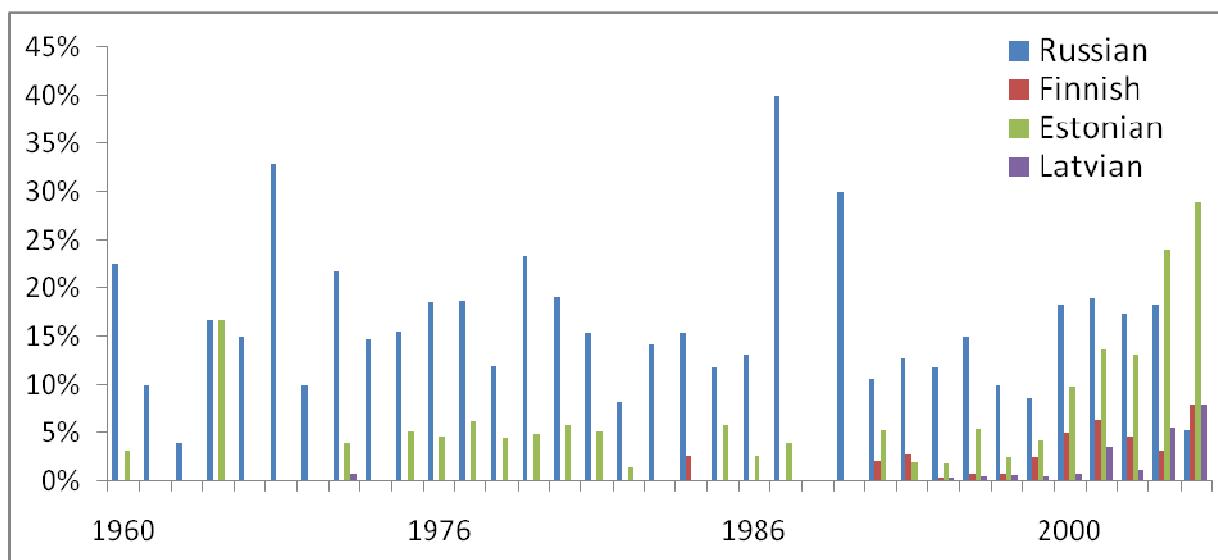


Figure 4. Neighbours as targets of Estonian ethnic jokes (1960 – 2004)

Finnish would be the most suitable target according to Davies' theory, though the economic and cultural asymmetricality works the other way (Finns as the better-off and dominant) – this of course depends on the subjective positioning and less on historical facts. But it is Latvians, our Southern neighbours, who are emerging as the targets of stupidity jokes, as some examples show:

Latvian Air is making its first flight to Tallinn. "We are nearly there there", says Captain Renars , "but what a short runway it is!".

Renars and co-pilot Uldis still decide to risk landing the plane. With the engine roaring and burning tyres, the plane stops just a few inches from the end of the runway. The crew and passengers all sigh with relief.

Renars looks out of the window and exclaims: "Well that sure is the shortest runway I've ever seen!".

"Yup," agrees Uldis, looking from side to side. "but look how wide it is!"

Latvian news story.

On Tuesday evening, there was a major power cut in downtown Riga. Hundreds of people were trapped waiting for the escalators to start moving again.

- What do you get when you cross a donkey and a turtle?

- A Latvian with a helmet

- In the light of this fact that the neighbours are entering stupidity jokes, we can assume that also some of the "old" stupidity groups have reappeared, and this sure is the case. The amount of jokes about Estonians (see also Figure 4) includes mostly different local ethnic groups, and as we saw, they are increasing. Some joke examples from this – though small –category:

A Hiiu man goes to the clinic.

He complains to the attractive female doctor: "I think I have three testicles:" The doctor asks him to undress, looks and examines thoroughly, but sees nothing unusual. She asks the nurse to come and see too. They examine the man together, but conclude he's only got two and there are no anomalies. The Hiiu man gets dressed, thanks the doctor and leaves.

As he is going out he meets a friend, who is curious about what he was doing at the doctor's. "I had some spare time before the ferry left," replied the Hiiu man. "So I came here to have my balls massaged."

Setu man who had been conscripted into the army said he wanted to join the navy.

- "You want to transfer to the navy? But can you swim?"

- "Swim? Don't they have any ships?"

The most fascinating part of the problem here is that all Davies' rules seem to apply to old folk jokes from the 1880ies, then there is a break in the Soviet period, and now again a search for our own targets of stupidity jokes as opposed to Russian loans. The issue is rather about the focus of jokes as relevant to certain political, economic, cultural conditions.

On one level: there is the inevitable reality of change. Culture contacts and periods of intensive political-economic etc change do affect folklore in an indisputable way. We see this also in Estonian jokes where these transformations are well visible first because of the large scope of societal changes, and second because these took place in a relatively short period of time, and we can backtrace the changes. The recent trends of globalization are changing present jokes. The 1990ies turn towards the West followed also in a great influx of foreign, mostly English loans, but we also see again a creative adaption of joke scripts to meet the need of self-identification. We can actually say that at all times, jokes were a conscious choice, the focus was on the relevant issues: at Soviet times, people were most concerned with the politics and ethnic groups behind it, there was no need for more elaborate and freerunning alterations or modifications of Soviet jokes, sometimes not even a translation of the jokes was considered necessary – they were told in Russian. After the regained independence the main focus was on the quest for a new identity which in jokelore can be visible in a certain rejection of Soviet scripts and even in a sense turning back to 19th century models – at least in terms of target choice.

On the second level: there is the information provided by the changes. And there are trends that can be taken to signify more, or be exemplary of some region / type of society. The choice of joke targets in socialist and post-socialist times indicates that some socio-political conditions form an outstanding exception for widely recognized theories (such as Davies' theory of ethnic humour).

Creating and altering of traditions is thus closely connected with everyday reality, the everyday issues. Active search for a new identity and tradition is clearly visible in the Estonian material. This is initiated by our juxtaposition to the Soviet jokes in Estonian jokelore, and at the same time in a kind of "back to the roots" movement.

Conclusion:

- The theory of Christie Davies on ethnic humour does not fully apply to the choice of targets of Estonian ethnic jokes

- This discrepancy is due to the strong influence of the Soviet jokelore on Estonian jokes during the second half of the 20th century
- Contemporary Estonian ethnic jokes are striving to re-discover the joke targets familiar from the 19th century joke tales
- Jokes are dependent on the immediate political, cultural, economic etc environment, shaped by relevant issues like quest for national identity