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# **Children's funny sayings in the view of linguistic theories of humour**

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# Aims of the paper

From October 2010 to January 2011, the Estonian Literary Museum organized **a collection competition for nursery school lore** (in Estonia up to age 7). Teachers sent us over 100 pages of funny expressions and remarks of children.

The material (appr. 1000 texts) can be regarded as **part of family, group and pre-school lore**. These jokes are a **part of everyday speech**. They usually come across as entertaining, spontaneous, and mundane situational humour **that children themselves ordinarily do not see as funny**.

## My presentation aims

- to investigate the utterances **that teachers have perceived as funny or worth recording**;
- to analyse **which are the humour theoretical mechanisms** on the basis of which the sayings can be seen as funny

# Interdisciplinary research

In terms of **folklore**, children's jokes fall into the category of funny things that have happened in real life and (language specific) **stories based on humorous life events** (Hiimäe 2014: 845).

Sigrid Schmidt (2005: 257) highlighted three types of children's jokes:

- 1) jokes whose heroes are usually stereotyped figures, which is the category in which she places the majority of folklore jokes;
- 2) jokes told between children in which children (as heroes) and adults are confronted;
- 3) actual remarks by children usually addressed to adults that adults regard as amusing though the children are serious.**

**Unintentional humour** (Martin 2007), **accidental humour** (Nilsen & Nilsen 2000)

# Interdisciplinary research

The **linguistic goal** of such corpora is to study the problems associated with the acquisition of a first and second language, bilingualism, and various clinical problems.

The representative corpus created on the basis of recordings of everyday speech (the first Estonian data were added in 1998) has been added to the international CHILDES system (Child Language Data Exchange System), which was developed in order to provide a common basis for transcribing, processing, comparing and sharing the language material collected by different researchers.

# Linguistic (verbal) accidental humour

General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH, Attardo & Raskin 1991) – the hierarchic representation model of six knowledge resources:

**1)script opposition (SO)**, which was taken over from Raskin's (1985) earlier semantic theory of humour and which states that a joke must be compatible with two different scripts and these in turn must be in opposition to each other to a certain extent;

**2)logical mechanism (LM)**, which when breached causes discrepancies and false analogies that evoke humour;

**3)situation (SI)**, which forms the contextual foundation of the joke and includes activities, participants, objects, etc.;

**4)target (TA)** or the butt of the joke;

**5)narrative strategy (NS)** or the genre in which the joke works (e.g. anecdote, proverb, riddle), in this case longer or shorter texts that briefly describe activities and are presented as monologues or dialogues where the main emphasis is on the child's remark;

**6)language (LA)** or the actual lexical, syntactic, phonological, and other choices necessary for the emergence of humour.

# Material and method of collection and analysis



The winners of all-Estonian contest (October 2010 – January 2011) **of collecting kindergarten lore**. Final ceremony in Tartu where the senders of best contributions were awarded by the Prseident of Estonia.

# Material and method of collection and analysis

Participants were asked to give their answers in free format, covered three topics: 1) Festive occasions and parties; 2) Games; 3) Tales and remarks.

There was a separate point C under the third topic:

***Please observe children for some time and write down any funny remarks they make.***

This was answered by 45 pre-school employees (teachers, speech therapists) from 34 Estonian-language pre-schools nationwide.

The material received consisted of 100 pages of material and appr 1000 children's jokes written down by adults.



Kunstaja: Piiret Voolaid, Tehniline teostaja (pildid): Raido Kuus

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Tartu 2013

All of the material received during the collection competition has been entered in the database „Out of the mouth of babes“ <http://folklore.ee/Lapsesuu/> (Voolaid 2015), which is password-protected due to ethical reasons.



# The system is created according to needs of the researcher

folklore.ee/Lapsesuu/otsing\_tulemus

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## Lapsesuu

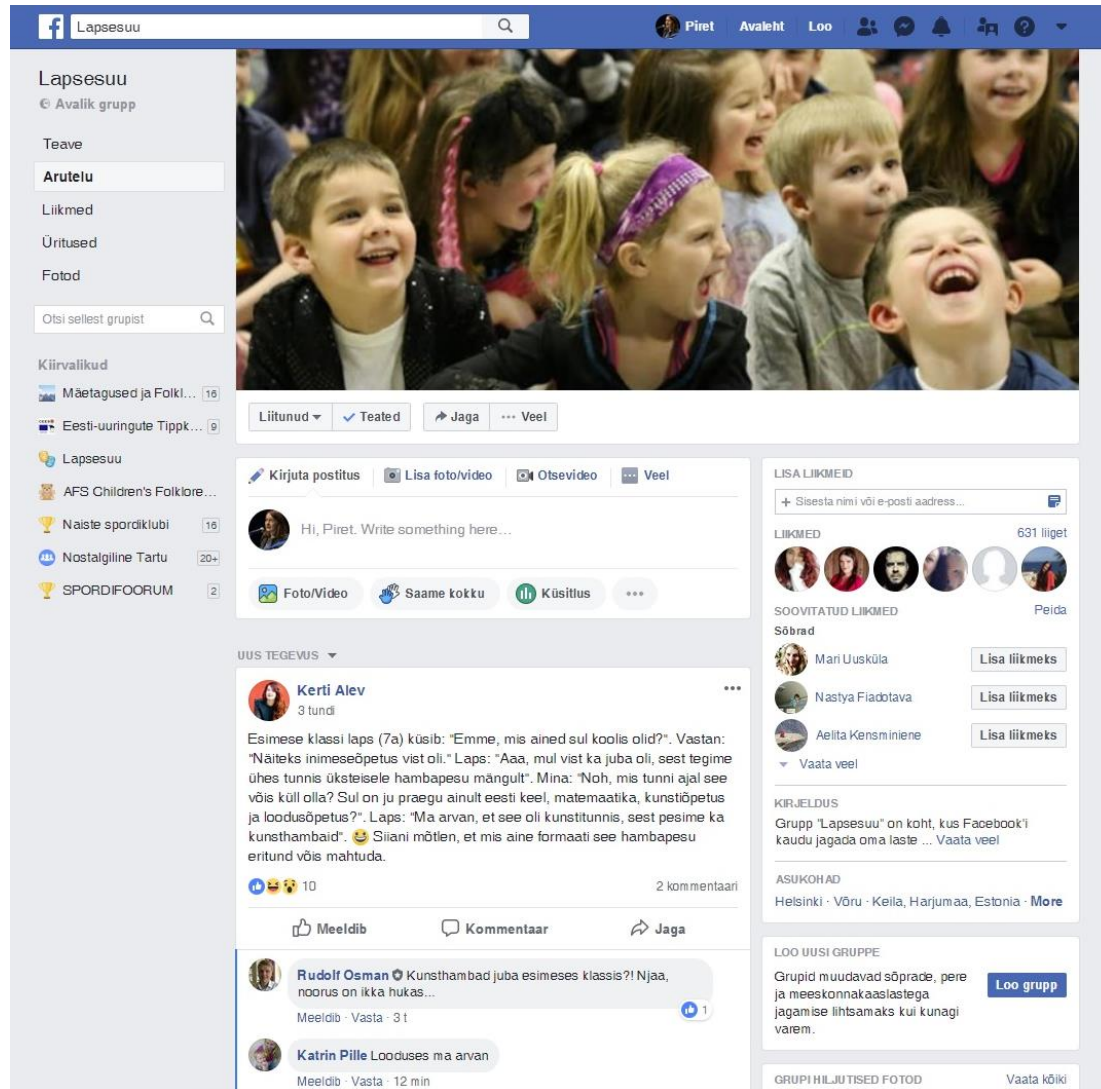
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Tekst	Arhiviviide	Koguja	Koht	Dateering	Sisumärksõna	Kaaskiri	Kategooria
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The database „Out of the mouth of babes“ <http://folklore.ee/Lapsesuu/> (Voolaid 2015)

# Potential to add different material in future



The screenshot shows the Facebook interface for the group 'Lapsesuu'. The top navigation bar includes the Facebook logo, the group name 'Lapsesuu', a search bar, and user avatars for 'Piret', 'Avalik', and 'Loo'. The left sidebar lists group categories: 'Teave', 'Arutelu', 'Liikmed', 'Üritused', and 'Fotod'. Below this is a search bar for groups and a list of 'Kiirvalikud' (quick picks) including 'Mäetagused ja Folk...', 'Eesti-uuringute Tippk...', 'Lapsesuu', 'AFS Children's Folklore...', 'Naiste spordiklubi', 'Nostalgiline Tartu', and 'SPORDIFOORUM'. The main content area features a large photo of children laughing. Below the photo are interaction buttons: 'Liitunud', 'Teated', 'Jaga', and 'Veel'. A post by 'Kerti Alev' is visible, with the text: 'Esimese klassi laps (7a) küsis: "Emme, mis ained sul koolis olid?". Vastan: "Näiteks inimeseõpetus vist oli." Laps: "Aaa, mul vist ka juba oli, sest tegime ühes tunnis üksteisele hambapesu mängult". Mina: "Noh, mis tunni ajal see võis küll olla? Sul on ju praegu ainult eesti keel, matemaatika, kunstõpetus ja loodusõpetus?". Laps: "Ma arvan, et see oli kunstitunnis, sest pesime ka kunsthambaid". 😊 Siiani mõtlen, et mis aine formaati see hambapesu eritund võis mahtuda.' The post has 10 reactions and 2 comments. Below the post are buttons for 'Meeldib', 'Kommentaari', and 'Jaga'. A comment by 'Rudolf Osman' says: 'Kunsthambad juba esimeses klassis?! Njaa, noorus on ikka hukas...'. Another comment by 'Katrin Pille' says: 'Looduses ma arvan'. The right sidebar contains a 'LIISA LIIKMEID' section with a search bar and 631 members. Below this is a 'SOOVITATUD LIIKMED' section with three suggested members: 'Mari Uusküla', 'Nastya Fiadotava', and 'Aelita Kemsiniene', each with a 'Lisa liikmeks' button. The 'KIRJELDUS' section describes the group as a place for parents to share their children's experiences. The 'ASUKOHAD' section lists 'Helsinki · Võru · Keila, Harjumaa, Estonia · More'. The 'LOO UUSI GRUPE' section encourages creating new groups. At the bottom, there is a 'GRUPI HILJUTISED FOTOD' section with a 'Vaata kõiki' link.

The Facebook group Lapsesuu „Out of the mouth of babes“  
(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/mahlahambad>)

# Written recordings are generally divided into two:

- 1) remarks made during incidental everyday activities and communication; and
- 2) remarks received in response to targeted questions asked by teachers and their expectations (the teacher has recorded a discussion of a given subject, e.g. the meaning of happiness, what children want to become when they grow up, etc.).

# Children's humour based on linguistic resource or language humour

One-third of the remarks are based on the level of word formation, and they create a source of humour based on wordplay in the classic sense. Linguistic jokes occur technically in ordinary speech as wordplay, but they differ in their nature from intentional puns, which are also considered linguistic jokes (similar to meta- and poetic language) (Attardo 1994).

Four categories of wordplay with similar words:

**paronyms** - words that are similar in their phonemic composition (sound), but that are not identically spelt and have different meanings, **homonyms** - similar in their phonemic and graphemic composition, divided into **homographs** – words that share the same written form as another word but have a different meaning (*bear* : *bear*), and **homophones** – words that are pronounced the same as other words but differ in meaning, and may differ in spelling (*mourning* : *morning*).



At the lexical level, the replacement of letters in a word is enough to lead to a joke:

*Janek (6): “Marjo, kas sul **mokamütsi** on?” (“Marjo, do you have a **lip** cap?”; *mokamüts* – lip cap; *nokamüts* – billed cap); there is *m* alliteration: *mokamüts* instead *nokamüts*.*

A grammatical slip of the tongue may also make a word humorous, e.g. choosing the wrong thematic vowel or consonant gradation that the child is unable to use normatively:

*We're driving past the Anne rowing canal and 6-year-old Ander says: "Lähme homme siia **kanalasse** ujuma" ("Let's go swimming in the **chicken farm** tomorrow"); (kanal : kanalissee – canal; kanala : kanalasse – chicken farm).*

*5-year-old Sven Erik heard his teacher and mum speaking about blood sausages and found that: "**Seasid** tapetakse" ("Pigs are killed", the correct form in Estonian would be "sigu").*

A typical example of a slip of the tongue is the metathesis in the expression *kõrge kontsaga kingad* or *kontsakingad* ('high-heeled shoes' or 'heeled shoes'), whereby teachers have written down mistakes on four occasions (and interestingly, all the mistakes have been made by girls):

*kintsakongad,*

*konksa kingad,*

morphological derivation with the same expression has also been recorded:

*ilusad kontsatatud kingad*

*kontsad.*



The jokes based on paronomastic formation:

*Gerdo tells the girls: “Ma olen saanud kunagi **pasteedi** peal hüpata!” (“I got to jump on **pâté** once!”); (*pasteet* – *pâté*; *batuut* – trampoline, *pâté* instead trampoline*

*Miiu (4): “Minu lemmikloom on **amsterdam**” (“My favourite animal is **amsterdam!**”) (*Amsterdam* instead of *hamster*).*





Morphological derivation, e.g. deriving a verb from a noun, is also characteristic of child language:

*Õnne Liis* goes to the new cleaning corner in the room: “*Teen lapi märjaks ja lähen **lappima!***” (“I’ll make the rag wet and go **ragging!**”) (*lapp* – rag, cloth, patch; *lappima* – to mend something by putting a patch on it).

*Eliise* (2) shows her polished nails: “*Näe, vaata – Mann **küüsis!***” (“Look – Mann **nailed!**”) (*küüs* – nail, *küüsima* does not exist).



The mechanism also works in the opposite direction – children derive nouns from verbs:

*An electrician is working in the room, changing a switch on the wall.  
Mikael (5): “Kas sa paned meile uue **vajutela**?” (“Are you installing a new **presser**?”) (*vajutama* – to press; *lüliti* – switch).*

*Kirke-Liisa: “Gerdo läheb uisutama **uisulasse**!” (“Gerdo will go skating in the **skatery**!”) (*uisutama* – to skate).*



The material contains original creations arising from the individual logic of children, who have their own etymology:

*Annabel, two, calls the checkout lady in the shop “maksma tädi” (‘pay auntie’), because her mum always says in the shop that now we have to pay auntie for the goods.*

Homonymic creation of entirely new words is also common:

*„Ema, vaata, kapsutaja tuleb!” (“Look, mum, the peacher is coming!”)  
(kapsutaja is used instead of kasvataja).*



Many of the written recordings contain mix-ups of words, semantic changes or associations and analogies, which work as mnemotechnical methods in the case of children (children sort of remember something from earlier conversations, but not entirely correctly):

*Teacher: "What river runs through Tartu?"*

*Ott (6): "**Emavesi!**" "(Mother Water!"*

*(the correct answer would be Emajõgi – Mother River).*

Repeated associations or linguistic developments that are probably influenced by pop culture (films and books):

- many children associated Dalmatian dogs with being black and white, calling black and white cows they see in pastures *Dalmatian* cows and referring to a cabbage white butterfly as a *Dalmatian* butterfly;

- Well known TV show *Inspector Rex* has inspired to use the name Rex as a synonym for a dog.



Many texts illustrate the emphatic anthropomorphic approach of children whereby they liken the nature of surrounding objects to themselves, give life to lifeless objects, attribute feelings to lifeless objects, and so on.

*Teacher: “What happens to a tree when rabbits chew off its bark?”*

*Sigrid: “**The tree gets cold!**”*

Children may also treat commodities, clothes, footwear, etc., as living beings in their speech.

*Maria (4) comes in from outside: “I am all covered in snow and my **boots are cold!**”*

Many written records reflect the sincere attempts of children to justify and describe phenomena and situations on the basis of their experience and logic.

Argumentation in these texts is extremely creative considering the limited life experience of children, but it may come across as extremely funny for adults:

*Children are playing a guessing game. The teacher describes the object in the picture:*

*“It’s lifeless, round, and black and white.”*

*“A cow,” guesses Alvaro.*

*“I said that it’s lifeless,” says the teacher.*

*“A dead cow!” says Alvaro.*

# Constant references to socio-cultural contexts

## Gender stereotypes

*Kalle tells the others with an air of importance: “A real man can take the cold!” (A real man can take anything.)*

*Raul to Madis-Maiold: “Guess why I don’t like bald girls? Because I think then that they’re boys!” (A girl who has short hair or is bald is boyish.)*

*Having heard a teacher say “Eww!” four-year-old Andri asks: “Are you also some shrieking woman?” (Women express themselves by shrieking.)*

*Five-year-old boy: “Women are necessary, because without them there would be no children.” (The importance of a woman’s role lies in giving birth and raising children.)*



# Conclusion

- The way children experience and express things is usually turned into a story **by someone else** who happened to witness the event.
- The jokes written down by pre-school teachers represent **the adult's position** and, at the time of writing down, they are **more humour of the grown-ups rather than children's humour**, which made it important to use an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis.
- According to theories of humour, **remarks are usually accidental incidences of humour that arise in everyday activities**, but sometimes they can also be the **result of the targeted discussions of topics**.
- The majority of remarks perceived as funny **are based on linguistic mechanisms: on slips of the tongue associated with language acquisition process and linguistic development of children as well as the process of getting to know the world**, which leads to unique and original interpretations.



Thank you for your attention!