Estonian three nation jokes (1964–2012)[1]

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Abstract: The present article gives an overview of Estonian three nation jokes throughout three periods: Soviet time, 1990s, and present time. The general survey of Estonian three nation jokes will be presented, first of all, considering its changes through those three periods of recent history. In conducting statistical analysis of the series, we see a Zipfian decrease in the popularity of targets, whereas clear-cut stepwise decay on the higher part of the scale can also be noted (with the Russian being the unrivalled leader, followed by the Estonian and German, and the (North-)American, French and English ranking third). The popularity of ethnic characters on the lower end of the scale is rising alongside with the diversification of joke texts. The main nations in all the three positions ("initialisers", "follow-uppers", and "punchline-makers") of a three nation joke will be named, besides presenting a list of top ten joke plots that are present in the Estonian material.

Keywords: three nation jokes, Soviet period, post-socialist period, ethnic characters

> *I am ashamed to be a white hetero male*
> *and to write about ethnic jokes.*

The paper aims to provide some preliminary statistics on Estonian ethnic jokes (read: joke plots) which were recorded in the last half-century, some of which display three or more different ethnonyms (ethnic characters, names of nationalities, races or countries, etc.) in one joke text.

For understandable fundamental and technical reasons we have to skip any general introduction to and discussion on the basic conceptual constituents of the following topics:

- the number three, and the mathematical, numerological, philosophical, theological and semiotic problems connected with it, its functioning as a productive device of repetition, its salient role in building various

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rhetorical and narrative (including folkloric) structures, works on its functioning in culture and verbal creativity (cf. Axel Olrik, Alan Dundes, and many others);

- ethnic jokes, particularly their historical fate, simultaneous abundance and scarcity of sources, increasingly derogatory attitude of contemporary humour scholars towards ethnic jokes (and jokes in general) as a boring, obsolete, "canned", petrified kind of humour, accompanied by a drastic decrease of interest in ethnic jokes during the last 7 years as measured by Google at http://aolscandal.com/k/ethnic+jokes (see Fig. 1 below).

Figure 1. *Interest in 'ethnic jokes' 2004–2012 (Google).*

Our data corpus and Zipf's Law

I have compiled a database of Estonian three nation jokes found in printed and Internet sources from 1964 up to the present time and divided the material into three subperiods:

1) the Soviet time (1964–1992) – jokebook "Naeruga eilsest" ('Merrily about Yesterday') by Jüri Viikberg (1997), the Internet collection "Soviet-time jokes from Tartu" compiled by Luule Krikmann (www.folkore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/soviet.htm), and the synopsis of jokes in the school folklore collection of 1992 by Kadi Sarv (1994; 1996–1998; 1997);

2) the transition period (1993–1999) – includes Internet sources, e.g. individual "static" collections by Alar Alumaa, Henry Saar, Rain Ööpik, Erik Vallikivi, Innar Liiv and others; Sünerkom's "Our Jokebook"; online newspapers of the period (all available at www.folklore.ee/~liisi/02);

3) the 21st century (2000–2011) – Internet sources: Delfi Joke page and the portal Delfi in general (www.delfi.ee); other web sources of the period.

General numeric parametres of the data set are the following:
- number of different plots (or types) – 284
- total number of texts – 1166
- number of texts including ethnic characters – 1006
- total number of texts without any ethnic characters – 160
- number of different ethnic labels of characters involved – 56.

To estimate the density of connections between the ethnic characters involved and time periods, between different ethnic characters, between ethnic characters and their textual position in the triplets or longer chains of characters, etc., two simple parameters were used:
1) the values of the residuals of linear regression fields;
2) the so-called colligation coefficients (or "bivariate percentages") that are calculated from the formula

$$\lambda_{AB} = \frac{A \cap B \times \sum_{tab}}{\sum A \times \sum B} \times 100$$

where $A \cap B$ means the size of the common part (number of intersections) of events A and B, Σ_{tab} – the sum total of values in all cells of the matrix, ΣA – the sum total of occurrences of event A, and ΣB – the sum total of occurrences of event B. If $\lambda = 1$, events A and B are independent; if $\lambda > 1$, then A and B are positively correlated, if $\lambda < 1$, then their correlation is negative.

In natural (including linguistic, folkloric, etc.) data sets the frequencies of many kinds of units tend to follow an uneven, Zipfian type of distribution: there is a great number of infrequent ("feeble", "unproductive") units, a mean number of units of "medium frequency" and a small number of very frequent ("powerful", "productive") units.

This holds for our set of three nation jokes as well, first of all on the plot / text level (see Fig. 2 below):
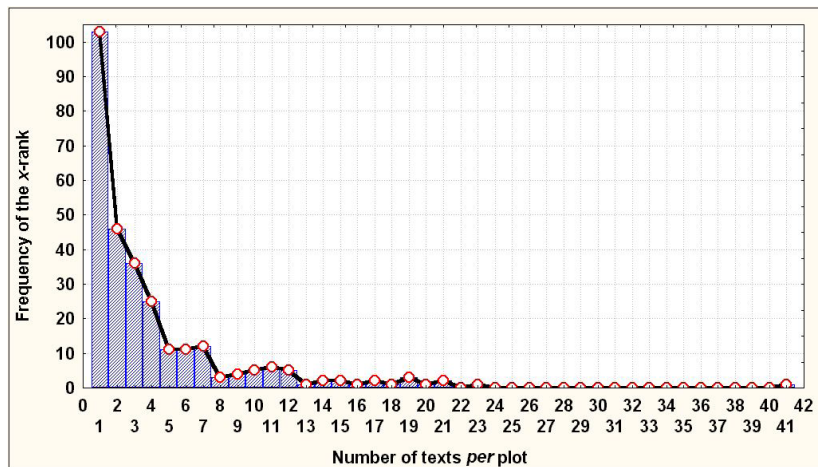
Figure 2. *Distribution of plots / texts.*

Statistics of any kind of population can be based, in principle, on frequencies of higher or lower order elements – numbers of families constituting the population or numbers of members of those families; individuals constituting the population or their "sizes", "weights" or any other features of them, briefly, types or tokens, so to speak. In our case, we can count, for example, all occurrences of a certain ethnonym in our data corpus, or texts containing this or that ethnonym, or joke plots containing them. Due to the expectedly Zipfian distribution of elements of a natural corpus, our statistics of occurrences or texts become "statistics of the mighties", and statistics of plots, in turn, become "statistics of the feebles".

For example, the mightiest in our joke corpus is the plot represented with 41 texts where the Estonian throws the Russian out of the plane 30 times, so they can both earn from this plot 30 points or one single point. Another mighty plot (21 texts) is the one where somebody has to fulfil three difficult tasks and after having drunk a bucketful of vodka rapes a bear instead of shaking hands with it and then asks for the nun he had to shake hands with; from this plot the Russian can earn again either 16 points or one single point. If we consider occurrences of these characters in the data of our three time periods, the Russian earns from the two plots above 3 + 3 = 6 points, and so on.

Moreover, one can assume that jokes with a pair of opposed characters even reveal a sharper than usual distribution of character frequencies, and in the case of jokes with "triplets" of characters, the frequencies should be distributed still more sharply, being as if squared and cubed by restricted conditions.

Let us compare the two graphs below.

The first variational series shows Liisi Laineste's (2008: 135) general distribution of target characters in Estonian ethnic jokes in 1960–2004: from the right to the left, frequencies are sliding downwards quite smoothly, without notable steps (see Fig. 3 below):
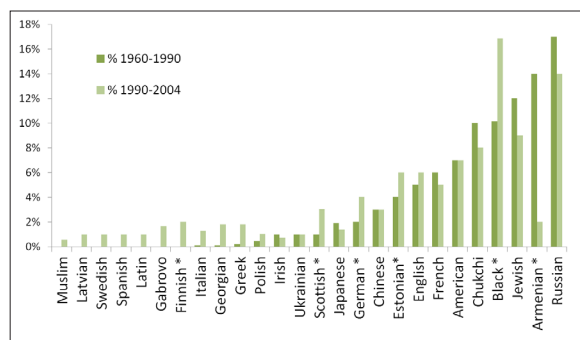

Figure 3. Share (%) of ethnic targets in Estonian jokes.

The second variational series below shows numbers of 23 most frequent ethnic markers in (allegedly independent, i.e. non-copied) texts of our three nation data set. On the lower degrees of frequency quite a smooth decreasing of values can be seen, but a drastically clear-cut stepwise decay on the higher part of the scale, the Russian being the unrivalled leader followed by a pair of "second rank" leaders – Estonian and German, a triplet of "third rank" leaders – (North-) American, French and English, and a triplet of "fourth rank" leaders – Jewish, Black and Finnish (see Fig. 4 below):
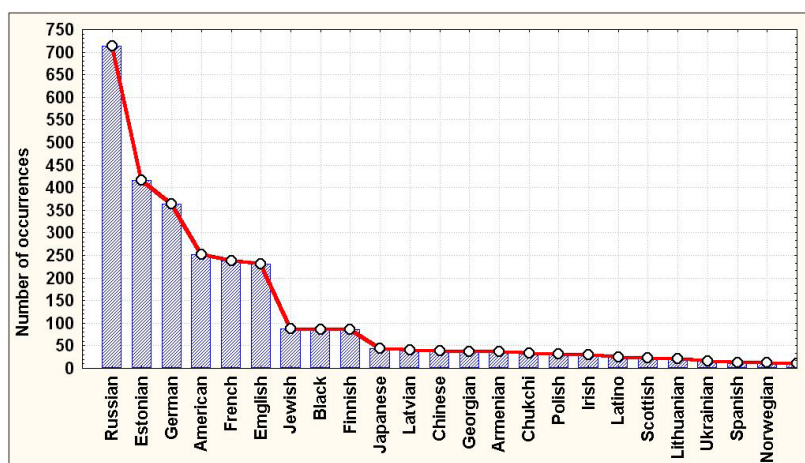

Figure 4. Occurrence of 23 most frequent ethnic characters on the level of texts.

In the statistics of plots, the frequency relationships of nations (again, particularly in the upper part of the scale) look considerably different: the Russian is clearly salient, as in the previous graph, but the next two ranks of the leading sextuplet are smoothed together, Estonian having lost his second place (see Fig. 5 below):
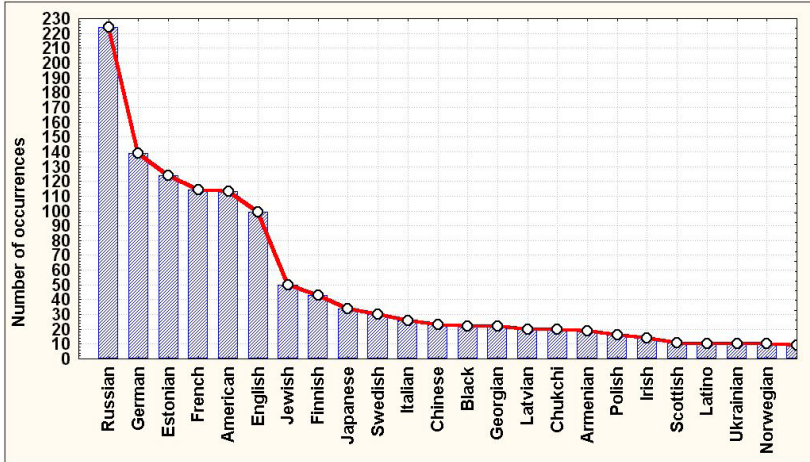

Figure 5. Occurrence of 23 most frequent ethnic characters on the level of plots.

Temporal dynamics of ethnic characters and ethnonyms in general

As Liisi Laineste (2004; 2005) has convincingly proved, the development of Estonian ethnic jokes from the 1890s up to the present time has been characterised by continuous increase of ethnic characters involved in jokes and by the widening of the cultural and geographic scope of jokes. In the "post-socialist" period, a profound shift from the East to the West has happened, accompanied by the reduction of former typically Soviet joke targets, etc. (see also Figure 6 from Laineste 2005: 201 below).
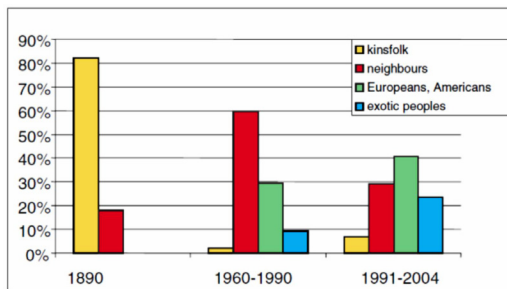

Figure 6. Share (%) of different groups of ethnic targets in Estonian ethnic jokes (1980s, 1960–1990, 1991–2004).

I attempted to make similar comparisons in my data set of three nation jokes.

As in Laineste's observations, the number of ethnic characters represented in the material of each sub-period turned out to be regularly increasing: 32 out of 56 in the Soviet time, 38 in the transitional period in the beginning of the 1990s, and 51 in the 21st century.

I also tried to estimate the degree of similarity between the materials of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd periods. The two tables below (raw data in the left frame and λ-coefficients in the right) show considerable indifference between data sets of different periods:

	I	II	III	Sum
I	104	42	74	220
II	42	92	68	202
III	74	68	237	379
Sum	220	202	379	801

λ	I	II	III
I	1,72	0,76	0,71
II	0,76	1,81	0,71
III	0,71	0,71	1,32

For the next step, I calculated estimates of connection of different ethnonyms with different time periods.

From November 2011 to June 2012 I added about 500 web texts (and herewith also 64 new plots) to my database, thus accentuating still more the already notable advantage of the 3rd period's data in the collection. Therefore, in order to make our statistics more reliable, I did not calculate the density of connection (residuals of linear regression) for each ethnic character within each particular time period, but instead only made the comparison between the data of the 20th and 21st century (i.e. between periods (1)+(2) and (3)). The residuals for the most part of the scale turned out to reveal fully expected trends, though in the case of lower absolute frequencies the gained estimates are statistically unreliable.

The results of calculations can be seen in the tables below, the left column of numbers showing absolute frequencies of nations, and the right column the residuals for the 21st century (the 3rd period). The main results are the following:

1. In general, the members of the "Great Sextuplet" have surrendered valences to the considerably increased number of recent newcomers:

Russian	708	−32,5
American	244	−28,0
French	234	−37,9
English	230	−30,1

2. The only "winners" among the members of the Sextuplet are Estonians and Germans. The first output is altogether not surprising and can be ascribed to the rise in national pride and self-consciousness of Estonians. The even stronger distinction of Germans is, on the contrary, rather surprising and needs a closer examination, because Germans and the German language do not enjoy a particular popularity in the contemporary Estonian culture:

Estonian	414	63,6
German	363	51,7

3. All former "Soviet favourites" and former Soviet nations in general have decreased in popularity:

Jewish	87	−15,9
Georgian	33	−9,6
Armenian	33	−7,6
Chukchi	30	−6,5
Lithuanian	13	−0,5
Ukrainian	12	−4,8
Azeri	6	−0,5
Uzbek	2	−0,7

4. Most geographically indirect representatives of the former "Socialist camp" have decreased in popularity:

Chinese	36	−2,8
Polish	25	−1,0
Czech	8	−3,9
Bulgarian	6	−3,5
Mongolian	5	−1,8
Romanian	2	−0,7
Hungarian	2	0,3
Albanian	1	1,0

5. All geographically neighbouring (non-Russian) peoples have increased in popularity:

Finnish	84	13,3
Latvian	37	6,5
Swedish	40	6,4

6. Most European nations from outside of the Sextuplet have increased in popularity or emerged only in the material from the last, 3rd period:

Italian	37	3,5
Irish	22	1,1
Scottish	15	−0,9
Spanish	10	0,6
Norwegian	10	1,6
Dutch	7	2,8
Danish	7	0,8
Greek	4	−0,1
Swiss	3	0,6
Austrian	2	1,3
Portuguese	1	1,0

7. Other some more distant representatives of the Western and Eastern culture in general (from outside of the Sextuplet) have increased in popularity or emerged only in the material the last, 3rd period:

Black	86	16,8
Japanese	44	−0,4
Latino	22	3,1
Turk	8	3,1
Gypsy	6	1,5
Indian	5	0,2
Australian	5	0,2
Arabian	4	1,9
Iranian	4	−0,1
Egyptian	3	0,6
Canadian	2	−0,7
Korean	1	1,0

"Initialisers", "follow-uppers" and "punchline-makers"

The next question of interest might be the positioning of different nations in the narrative structure of the punchlined joke. The three nation joke has, by definition, a tripartite structure of three (or exceptionally more) moves, each of which performs a particular function:
- the first move makes the first offer to resolve the previously initiated problem (escaping from the danger, humorous competition, bragging or boasting, etc.);

- the following intermediate move(s) provide(s) a relatively redundant follow-up in another semantic paradigm that, does not provoke the script opposition though;
- the last (third, as a rule) move is dissonant with the previous two moves and brings about the script change and the punchlining resolution.

Thus the actors of the three nation joke bear different "pragmatic loads" and are of different cognitive importance: the role of the "punchline-maker" can be conceived as similar to "starring", whereas the roles of the others can be rather qualified as "featuring".

I calculated λ-coefficients to estimate the density of connection of different ethnic figures with these three functions in the Estonian data set. As our data include texts with one to eleven different ethnonyms all in all, the following rules were applied to reduce the cases with fewer or more than three ethnonyms to triplets:

1) if the text included one single ethnonym, the bearer of that name was considered "punchline-maker";

2) if the text included two ethnonyms, the first of them was considered "initialiser" and the second "punchline-maker";

3) if the text included more than three ethnonyms, the person, country, language, etc. occurring at first was considered "initialiser", the one which came last was considered "punchline-maker", and all intermediate figures were considered "follow-uppers".

Some excerpts from λ–calculations are displayed below. The grouped lists below illustrate the inner functional division of some characters occurring in 10 or more texts:

Characters performing the initialising role most often:

	λ	Σ
American	1,83	244
Ukrainian	1,64	12
English	1,63	230
Italian	1,42	37
German	1,36	363
Japanese	1,34	44
Spanish	1,31	10
Norwegian	1,31	10
French	1,15	234
Swedish	1,15	40
Georgian	1,09	33
Latvian	1,06	37

Characters engaging most often the in-between position of the "follow-uppers":

	λ	Σ
Scottish	1,82	15
Polish	1,74	25
Chinese	1,67	36
French	1,62	234
Latino	1,61	22
Lithuanian	1,47	13
Japanese	1,36	44
German	1,36	363
Spanish	1,36	10
English	1,19	230
Armenian	1,07	33

Most typical "punchline-makers":

	λ	Σ
Chukchi	2,13	30
Irish	2,08	22
Estonian	2,03	414
Finnish	1,81	84
Jewish	1,54	87
Russian	1,48	708
Latvian	1,24	37
Georgian	1,11	33
Black	1,06	86

Top ten plots

Finally, let us list and briefly comment upon the top ten most productive / most frequent items in my database of Estonian three nation jokes. Quite evidently, the bulk of them is made up of internationally well-known scripts. I have not yet found any reliable sources to ascertain their origin and history.

1. Avoiding the plain crash – 41 texts

The joke circulates in two mutually intertwined versions:
1) a certain number of passengers have to jump out of the plane; they do it, shouting characteristic slogans like "Long live …"; the last one (in our material typically the Estonian) throws out another passenger (in our material typically the Russian) shouting "Long live the friendship of peoples!";
2) passengers are ordered to throw out either their dearest thing or something they have plenty of or too much; interpreting this order in his own way, one passenger throws out another passenger (in our material, the Estonian and Russian again).

2. "I am sailing with a brown boat on the yellow sea" ~ "Blue eye" ~

"Catch you – kill you!" – 23 texts

3. Three tasks, one of them being a handshake with a bear – 21

texts

The regular punchline-maker in our material is the Russian: after he has drank a bucketful of vodka, he mixes up the following tasks of shaking hands with a bear and raping a nun.

4. Teaching a cat to eat mustard – 21 texts

The winning move is predominantly made by the Russian; in several Russian texts also Stalin. The animal eats mustard "voluntarily and while singing" (the ending formula sounds particularly well in Stalin's Russian with a strong Georgian accent: "Вот видитэ – дабраволна и с пэснями!"). In contemporary Estonian the motif of feeding mustard to a cat has received the quality of an independent rhetorical unit, as a paragon of creativity and "collateral thinking", and reveals many creative manifestations in various contexts in the Internet.

5. "What is this? Some kind of a joke?" – 21 texts

A German, a Russian, and an Estonian (or some other triplet) walk into the bar. The bartender says: …

6. Boasting with huge virile members – 19 texts

Three men in a bar are drinking and boasting with great things they have in their countries (usually towers and bridges or submarines and jet fighters in the first two moves); the punchlining third move occurs in two clear-cut versions:

1) the Russian tells about a big number (15 ~ 12 ~ …) of sparrows having room enough to sit on the members of Russian men;
2) the Finn tells about some guy living in the centre / suburb of Helsinki possessing a huge member.

7. After a failed brain surgery the patient begins to speak Finnish or Russian – 19 texts

8. "A box of vodka and friends back!" – 19 texts

This is the Russian's famous wish addressed to the golden fish on the desert island.

9. Somebody farted so loud that the lavatory blew up – 18 texts

10. I am Wilhelm Tell – I am Robin Hood – I am sorry! – 17 texts

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