

Estonian “three-nation” jokes (1964–2011)

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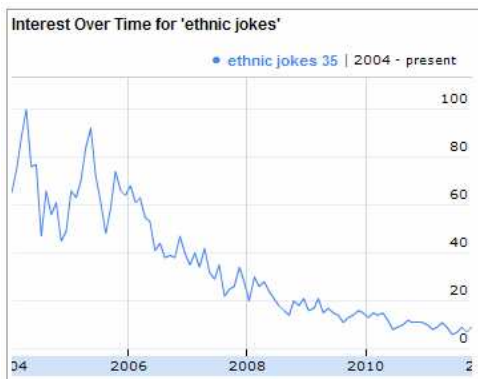
Kronso, Poland, 28.–29. October 2011

It is not too much I can do in the following 15 minutes.

To begin with, I would like to make some brief remarks on the present value state of ethnic jokes in the theory of humour and folkloristics.

The strengthening invasion of political correctness has brought about a lot of good and bad consequences, one of them being increasingly derogatory attitude towards ethnic jokes (and jokes in general) as a boring, obsolete, “canned”, petrified kind of humour.

On September 23 this year, Don Nilsen has sent an e-mail to all members of the ISHS in which he announces his intention “to write a book about humor focusing on the changing nature of humor and how people are no longer happy to sit back and laugh when someone tells a “canned joke.” Today, people want to participate in the creation of the humor they laugh at.”



Google <http://aolscandal.com/k/ethnic+jokes>

has measured the intensity of web search interest for ethnic jokes during the last 7 years, and the interest turns out to be drastically decreasing (see the graph at left).

The lion’s share of the research of leading humour psychologists like Willibald Ruch, Rod Martin et al. in this century has been dedicated to “positive” aspects of humour and bears a specific “socio-medical” or “psycho-hygienic” seal. Nevertheless, some people have dared to resist the mainstream trend. For example, an anonymous author writes in the introduction to his or her small Internet collection of Australian ethnic jokes:

With the advent of "political correctness" sweeping through all levels of Australian society, the "ethnic joke" has now been designated as "taboo", and is set to become a thing of the past. Of this new set of circumstances, one commentator has said that "The zealots of political correctness are stamping out everything enjoyed by normal everyday Australians. These zealots are the new Wowsers".

Nonetheless, these circumstances do exist.

However, the "ethnic joke" is considered to be an important part of the structure of Australian humour, and is part of our oral history. In order to avoid the loss of this aspect of Australian social culture (a loss that so frequently occurs with so much of society's oral history), it has been decided to collect as many "ethnic jokes" as possible, and collate them into one volume.

It is interesting to note the creeping Americanisation of the Australian culture and language; and therefore some readers may observe some American influence in some of the jokes contained herein. Some English influences may also be noted.

Some of the jokes within this collection may be deemed to be offensive to some people. However, it should be recognised that most jokes, if not all jokes, would be deemed to be offensive to some people. Religious jokes can offend religious people, disabled jokes can offend disabled people, homosexual jokes can offend homosexuals, lawyer jokes can offend lawyers, ethnic jokes can offend ethnics, "dirty" jokes can offend prudish people, death jokes can offend or upset people who have recently lost someone close to them, etc., etc., etc. - the point should be clear.

<http://www.fajaf.com/lokalt/PIEJB.html>

So it is a prohibited topic that I and Dorota Brzozowska have to address in our today’s presentations.

I totally omit any general discussion of the significance of the number three in folklore by Alan Dundes etc.

I compiled a tiny database of Estonian “three-nation” jokes found in printed and Internet sources from 1964 to the present and divided the material to three subperiods:

1) the Soviet time (1964–1992) – jokebook “Naeruga eilsest” [Merrily about Yesterday] by Jüri Viikberg, the Internet collection “Soviet-time jokes from Tartu” compiled by Luule Krikmann, and the synopsis of jokes in the school folklore collection of 1992 by Kadi Sarv;

- 2) the transition time (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;
- 3) the 21st century (2000–2011) – Internet sources: Delfi Joke page and the portal Delfi in general; other accidental occurrences in web sources of the period.

General numeric parameters of the data set:

number of different plots (or types) – 220

total number of texts – 668

number of texts including ethnic characters – 573

total number of texts without any ethnic characters – 95

the number of “nations” (different ethnic labels of characters) involved – 65.

To estimate the density of the connections between the involved ethnic characters 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 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 , \sum_{tab} – the sum total of values in all cells of the matrix, $\sum A$ – the sum total of occurrences of event A and $\sum B$ – 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;

- 2) the values of the residuals of linear regression fields.

In natural (including linguistical, 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. Moreover, one can assume that jokes with a pair of opposed characters even reveal a sharper than usual distribution of character frequencies, and jokes with “triplets” of characters their frequencies should be distributed still sharper, being as is if squared and cubed by restricted conditions.

Let us compare the two graphs below.

The first variational series shows Liisi Laineste’s 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 ranking.

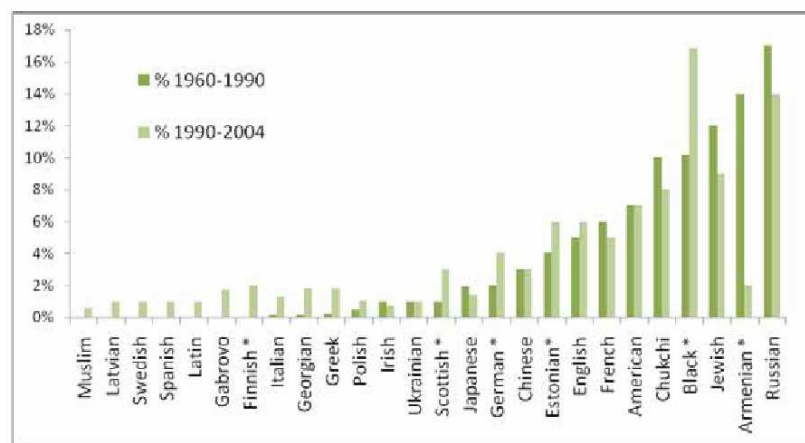
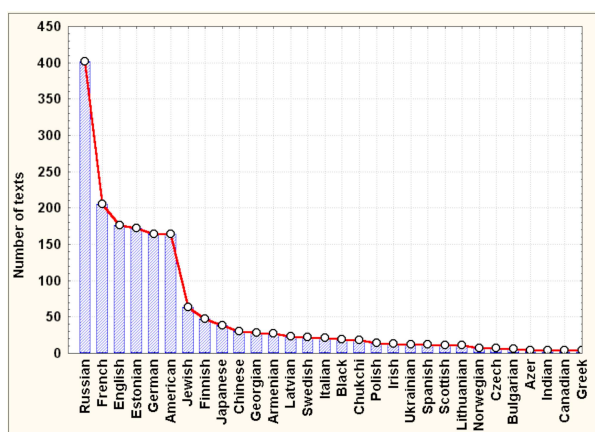


Figure 2. Targets of Estonian ethnic jokes, 1960–2004. The nations marked with an asterisk (*) show a statistically relevant change in popularity (percent improvement coefficient was calculated, and an increase or decrease exceeding 25% was considered significant). No distinction was made between local ethnic groups in the case of “Estonian”.



The second variational series below shows numbers of 30 most frequent ethnic markers in (allegedly independent, i.e. non-copied) texts of our “three-nation” data set. On the lower degrees of frequency we see again quite smooth decreasing of values, but a drastically clearcut stepwise decay on the higher part of the scale, the Russian being the unrivalled leader and followed by a quintuplet of “second rank” leaders – French, English, Estonian, German, and (North-) American.

I have not yet performed any detailed (pairwise or multiple) calculations in order to estimate the density of connections between all particular ethnic markers. However, the following bird’s-eye

grouping results in surprisingly balanced distribution of group sizes (i.e. numbers of non-copied texts representing each group):

1. Internal combinations of non-Estonian members of the “Great Sextuplet”: American and/or English and/or French and/or German and/or Russian – 164 texts.
2. Estonian in linkage with whatever other nations (or, exceptionally, alone) – 171 texts.
3. One or more non-Estonian members of the “Great Sextuplet”, plus one or more peoples from outside the Sextuplet – 189.
4. All the rest, i.e. combinations totally consisting of peoples from outside the Sextuplet – 49.

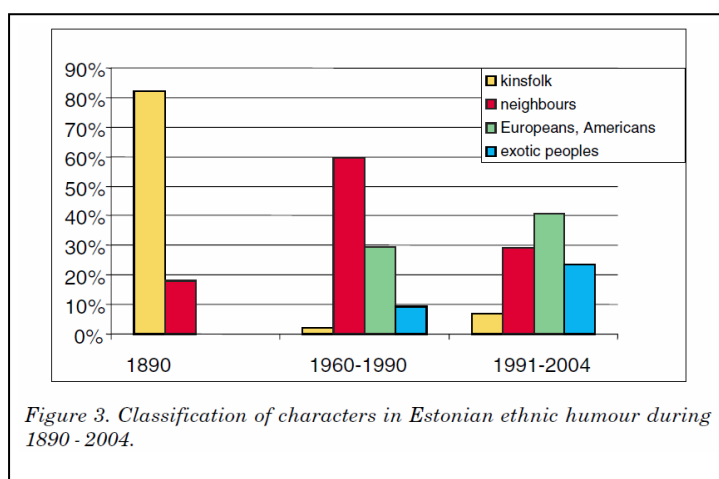


Figure 3. Classification of characters in Estonian ethnic humour during 1890 - 2004.

As Liisi Laineste has irrefutably proved, the development of Estonian ethnic jokes from the 1890s to now has been characterised by continuous increase of involved ethnic characters, by widening of the cultural and geographic scope of jokes. In the “postsocialist” 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 the graph above).

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

As in Laineste’s observations, the number of peoples represented in the material of each subperiod turned out to be regularly increasing:

29 of 65 for the Soviet time, 40 for the transition period, and 57 for the 21st century.

For the next, I calculated λ -coefficients for intersections of each people with each time period, but the gained results more often than not appeared difficult to interpret, due to the multitude of statistically unreliable small or zero absolute frequencies in the lower part of the scale, therefore I skip here a more detailed discussion of them.

However, having recalculated the same relations for the Socialist and Postsocialist time (that is, the periods 1 and 2+3, respectively), the result became fully rationalisable. I provide some more reliable fragments of the gained λ -field for some groups of nations, the left column showing colligations for the Soviet and the right column for the Postsocialist period.

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

Russian	132	89
French	122	92
English	107	97
American	108	97

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 on 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 German language do not enjoy a particular popularity in the contemporary Estonian culture:

Estonian	65	112
German	40	121

3. All former “Soviet favourites”, and former Soviet nations in general, have decreased in popularity:

Jewish	159	79
Georgian	152	82
Armenian	143	85
Chukchi	150	82
Ukrainian	129	90
Lithuanian	129	90
Azeri	289	34
Uzbek	193	67

4. All geographically indirect representatives of the former “Socialist camp” have decreased in popularity:

Chinese	180	72
Polish	110	96
Czech	221	58
Bulgarian	257	45
Mongolian	257	45
Romanian	386	0
Hungarian	193	67

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

Finnish	16	129
Latvian	50	117
Swedish	53	117

6. All European peoples from outside of the Sextuplet have increased in popularity or come into being only in the material of the last, 3rd period:

Italian	37	122
Irish	0	135
Spanish	35	123
Scottish	0	135
Norwegian	0	135
Greek	0	135
Danish	96	101
Dutch	0	135
Swiss	0	135
Austrian	0	135

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

Japanese	81	107
Black	0	135
Indian	96	101
Canadian	0	135
Turk	0	135
Australian	0	135
Mexican	0	135
Brazilian	0	135
Egyptian	0	135
Cuban	0	135
Albanian	0	135
Arabian	0	135

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, though, does not provoke the script opposition;
- 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 my Estonian data set. The grouped lists below illustrate the inner functional division of some characters occurring in 10 or more texts. The numeric values in the columns denote the relative frequencies of their initialising, continuing and punchlining roles, respectively.

Most typical “punchline-makers” (sequences 3→2→1 and 3→1→2):

Russian	50	69	185
Estonian	62	25	226
Jewish	47	84	170
Finnish	37	53	217
Georgian	94	66	146
Armenian	61	108	128
Black	104	42	166
Chukchi	18	88	192
Irish	0	122	169

Characters engaging most often the inbetween position (sequences 2→1→3 and 2→3→1):

French	115	161	13
German	129	148	15
Japanese	110	162	17
Chinese	94	170	22
Swedish	120	132	43
Polish	94	151	45
Spanish	120	144	29
Scottish	90	168	29
Lithuanian	0	159	126

Characters performing most often the initialising role (sequences 1→2→3 and 1→3→2):

English	170	115	14
American	189	95	21
Latvian	114	92	96
Italian	141	113	45
Ukrainian	137	132	26

Finally, let us list and briefly comment up the top ten of most productive, most frequent items in my database of Estonian “three-nation” jokes. Quite evidently, the bulk of them is an internationally well-known stuff. Yet I have not found any trustful sources to ascertain their origin and history.

1. 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 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 a quality of an independent rhetorical unit, as a paragon of creativity and “collateral thinking” and reveals many manifestations in various contexts on the Internet.

2. Avoiding the plain crash – 20 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 for them “Long live”-slogans; 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 ~ too much: interpreting this order in his own way, one passenger throws out another passenger (in our material, the Estonian and Russian again).

3. Boasting with huge virile members – 17 texts

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

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

4. Three tasks, one of them being handshake with a bear – 10 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.

5. Who is the laziest? – 11 texts

The joke slightly reminds of the Schwank type ATU 1950 in the registers of traditional folktales. The hyperbolic manifestations of laziness vary largely, the most salient of them being perhaps the motif of sitting on one’s own balls. The contest of laziness is sometimes going on between the three ethnic characters, sometimes between three cats.

6. The Russian thunderbox – 12 texts

That Russian ~ Siberian lavatory consists of two sticks – the shorter one to lean on and the longer to keep wolves away. Triplet structures of this plot are rather exceptional than regular. Several Estonian bloggers have claimed that lavatories of the kind have really been and continue to be in use in the eastern areas of Russia.

7. Writing about elephants – 12 texts

The plot tends to include chains with more than three links. Its ending part branches to three main kinds of punchlining themes:

- 1) the Soviet theme “Soviet elephant – the most progressive elephant of the world”;
- 2) “Bulgarian ~ Byelorussian elephant – the younger brother of the Soviet elephant”;
- 3) the specifically Finnish theme “What do elephants think about Finland?”

8. What is a queue? What is a sausage? – 12 texts

This is the most usual pair of questions asked by the capitalist and communist. The alternative questions suited to other characters and situations are, for example: “What is a shortage?”, “What is an opinion?”, “What is ‘please?’”, etc.

9. After the brain surgery the patient begins to speak Finnish or Russian – 12 texts

10. The cannibal offers his wife ~ Lumumba to somebody – 12 texts

Again, the punchline replica branches to two variants:

- 1) “Take one more piece!”;
- 2) “Don’t eat if you dislike it!”

That is regrettably all I have managed to do for the moment.

Thank you for attention!

Note: The research was supported by the ETF grant 8149