

“LAUGHTER AND SEX PROLONG LIFE”: CURRENT
 TRENDS IN THE HUMOUR PRACTICES OF
 RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS IN ESTONIA *

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the humour production, consumption and sharing of Russian-speakers in Estonia, based on the self-reflections and self-perceptions of their humour preferences and other humour-related behaviour. By studying the representation of the humour practices of this important minority community we can get a more complete picture of humour in Estonia. Analysis of survey results reveals that according to Russian-speakers, among their favourite topics were everyday life, and sex- and family-related matters. Visual humour was the most

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popular form. Respondents mentioned social media as the primary way of sharing humour, but oral transmission remained important as well. The language of the shared humour was primarily Russian, and the content was mainly not specific to the Estonian cultural context. As humorous vernacular expression offers insights into the mechanisms of identity-building and integration, the choice of language and of source can be interpreted as a way to create and maintain a local identity. On the whole, Russian-speakers in Estonia are reluctant to discuss their minority status in a humorous manner.

KEYWORDS: Russian-speakers in Estonia • identities • forms of humour • humour topics • sharing humour

INTRODUCTION

Estonian humour has for a long time been the focus of primarily local scholarly interest. Collections of Estonian oral jokes have been published since the 19th century (Eisen 1909), followed by 20th-century collections and research (Raudsep 1983; Viikberg 1997). In-depth and thorough analysis of Estonian contemporary humour includes studies by Arvo Krikmann (2004; 2012), Liisi Laineste (2005; 2012a; 2012b; 2015; 2018) and Piret Voolaid (2010; 2016; 2017). Current research focuses on genres of Estonian humour (Laineste 2015; Laineste and Voolaid 2016) as well as overviews of some popular topics (see Laineste and Kalmre 2017 for political and topical humour; Laineste 2005 and Laineste and Fiadotava 2020 for ethnic humour, and Laineste 2008 for post-Soviet humour).

The previous studies have generally focused on the humour of Estonian speakers (such a focus was largely determined by the availability of material and researchers' cultural background and linguistic competences), while the humour of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia is still an under-researched area (for an exception, see Juzefovičs and Vihalemm 2020), which leaves our understanding of Estonian humour incomplete. Johannes Brusila (2021) has noted that minority identities often include self-ironic humour which can be empowering for community members, helping them to negotiate tensions and address criticism of the majority as well as the minority itself. In the context of complicated inter-ethnic relations between the Estonian-speaking majority and Russian-speaking minority in Estonia (discussed below), the self-reported reflections on the humour of the latter might be a useful tool to investigate their identities and the degree of belonging to Estonian society. However, the complexity of inter-ethnic relations might also turn ethnic humour into a sensitive topic for self-reflection. Hence, paradoxically, the same factors that lead to the existence of a large quantity of ethnic humour might also lead to the unwillingness of people to discuss it actively.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before WWII, Estonia was a homogenous country ethnically and linguistically. Minorities made up approximately 10% of the total population (Verschik 2005: 285). Contact between Russians and Estonians goes back a long way, but it was only after WWII and the subsequent Soviet occupation that the ethnic composition and linguistic landscape

of Estonia was significantly modified. The local population sustained heavy losses because of the war, but also because of Nazi and early Soviet occupations. From 1945, mass deportations of Estonians to Siberia and massive settlement of Russian-speakers in Estonia took place and they began to dominate over the local people politically and socially (Kirch et al. 1993: 173). Estonian remained a prestigious language and was widely used, but Russian became predominant in many public domains (Verschik 2005: 286–287). By 1989, the share of ethnic Estonians dropped to approximately 60% (ibid.: 286). However, the post-Soviet period has seen new changes and the number of people of Estonian ethnicity has risen to 69.4% (Statistics Estonia 2022b).

These changes shaped the ethnic and linguistic map of Estonia in the second half of the 20th century: Tallinn, where Estonian and Russian were used in a similar proportion, the predominantly Russian-speaking north-east, and the rest of the country, where Estonian was widely used (Sazonov 2022: 144). After the fall of the USSR in 1991 the nation building process in many of the former Soviet republics took a turn from official bilingualism to monolingualism (Pavlenko 2013: 266 in Berezkina 2015: 4). In Estonia, Soviet-period settlers were not offered automatic citizenship, they had to apply for naturalisation and pass a language test. This paralleled the process of linguistic derussification (Berezkina 2015: 4).

The radical historical events of that era (the disintegration of the Soviet Union and restoration of Estonian independence) again changed the ethnic composition of Estonia, and since 1989 the Russian-speaking population has slowly declined. Nevertheless, Russian-speakers in Estonia remain an important, clearly delineated and numerous group among the Estonian population. According to the 2021 population census (Statistics Estonia 2022a) more than 23% of Estonian residents declared their ethnic origin to be Russian.

RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS IN ESTONIA TODAY

Russian speakers in Estonia are not a homogenous community. Martin Ehala and Anastassia Zabrodskaja (2014: 183) find several degrees of acculturation, identification with and relation to this kinstate and conclude that “Russian speakers living in Estonia do not form a single unitary category [and] instead, the Russian-speaking community is quite diverse in respect to their beliefs and attitudes”. Estonia’s society has been characterised as split into two parallel worlds, specifically the Estonian- and the Russian-speaking (Helemäe and Vetik 2011: 15). It has also been suggested that, in terms of integration, the Russian-speaking population of Estonia is divided in two parts: one successfully integrated group and another that is less integrated or not integrated at all (Lauristin 2011 in Berezkina 2015: 5).

On the positive side of the integration spectrum, we can see a trend towards multilingualism among the Russian-speakers. Works on translanguaging and code-switching among members of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia (Zabrodskaja 2006; Verschik 2008; Karpava et al. 2021) reveal a current trend among young Russian-speaking adults to adopt multilingualism in several contexts. For example, Anna Verschik (2007) observes that in the multilingual setting of Tallinn, Russian-speakers no longer

aspire to monolingual communication in Russian. Instead, a growing number use Estonian as their second language. Finally, the wide use of English cannot be underestimated in a highly digital society like Estonia (Verschik 2015; Ivanova and Zabrodskaja 2021) as it fits into the trend of increasing cosmopolitanism observed among young Russian-speaking Estonian residents (Toots and Idnurm 2012).

However, Russian-speakers' media consumption in Estonia also reflects their ambiguous identities and the various methods they use to balance them. Reflecting on the status of Russians in the Baltics immediately after the end of Soviet occupation, Aksel Kirch, Marika Kirch and Tarmo Tuisk (1993: 178) noted that Estonians "are deeply engaged in the consumption of local culture", while Russians residing in Estonia preferred Russian cultural products. 30 years later Estonian Russian-speakers' media consumption has become more transnational as many combine local, Russian, and other countries' mainstream and social media outlets (Vihalemm and Juzefovičs 2022). Nonetheless, the Russian-language TV channel in Estonia (ETV+) remains less popular than Russian Federation channels, and Russian-language print media in Estonia are in decline (Pettai 2021: 432). As the reliance of Russian-speakers on Russian Federation news media is conceived as a security threat for Estonia and other Baltic countries, especially in contexts of crises (Oxford Analytica 2022; Vihalemm and Juzefovičs 2022), Estonian media make an effort to produce serious content in Russian to substitute for Kremlin propaganda (Sisu et al. 2022). At the same time Estonian-language media producers might be reluctant to bring Russian-speakers to their broadcasts, since they "face the risk of upsetting their current mainstream consumers who are not ready to see more 'ethnic others' in their everyday information space" (Vihalemm and Hogan-Brun 2013: 82). The variety of entertainment media (including humorous content) in Russian produced in Estonia is understandably smaller than the variety of entertainment media created in the Russian Federation. Therefore, Russian-speakers in Estonia face the dilemma of whether to look for humour in their native language that originates from Russia, or to consume English-/Estonian-language entertainment media.

As this overview suggests, Estonia has not managed to fully integrate its Russian-speaking minority into mainstream society socio-economically and culturally. Katja Koort (2014: 67–68) argues part of the community maintains stronger connections with Russia than with Estonia. Some Russian-speakers in Estonia also have a conflicting identity, feeling that they belong neither to Russia nor to Estonia (for a case in point, see Skerrett 2012: 374). The integration of the Russian-speaking population "has been one of the most important challenges of language planning and national policy in Estonia since the restoration of independence in 1991" (Berezkina 2015: 1). As a significant amount of research shows, ethnic segregation persists in several fields: the geographical concentration of the Russian-speaking population (Schulze 2011); spatial distribution and interethnic marriage (van Ham and Tammaru 2011); the school system (L'nyavskiy-Ekelund and Siiner 2017); clothing (Vihalemm and Keller 2011); leisure activities (Kamenik et al. 2015); and consumer behaviour (Polese and Selivertsova 2019), to name a few. Language is also a main cause of segregation. Many members of the Russian-speaking community are not fluent in Estonian and do not take the language exam that would allow them to obtain Estonian citizenship (van Ham and Tammaru 2011: 319; Astapova 2022: 498). On the other hand, trends towards the commodification

of languages (Heller 2010 in Berezkina 2015: 1) makes the situation more complex, since official monolingualism in Estonian coexists with a more pragmatic approach towards languages (Russian amongst them) in many spheres (see also Soler 2012).

Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities have clear and often opposing ideas about each other, Estonia and its history, but also national security and politics (see Kivirähk 2014). Based on our overview of the interethnic relations between Estonian- and Russian-speaking people living in Estonia, we hypothesize that, on the one hand, humour preferences (i.e. their choices of topic, form, language, etc.) reflect societal tensions, and should be especially evident in the creation and sharing of ethnic and political humour, and, on the other hand, humour preferences bear witness to the increasing multilingual practices that Russian-speakers are adopting.

In order to shed light on the subject of Estonian Russian-speakers' humour, the present paper aims to investigate their contemporary preferences in humour production, consumption and sharing. As the use of humour is analysed through the prism of Russian-speakers' own points of view, the study also intends to reflect on how Russian-speakers represent themselves through their sense of humour. In doing this, we address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the most popular self-reported topics, genres, and practices of sharing humour among Russian-speakers in Estonia?

RQ2: How do Russian-speakers in Estonia reflect on their humour and to what extent do they report using humour in relation to their local ethnic identity?

Humour is an excellent tool to study social groups and their relations to others (Dobai and Hopkins 2019). We believe that answering these two questions can yield information not only regarding the characteristics of the group's humour, but also about its status within Estonia and how this is expressed humorously.

DATA AND METHODS

The data was collected via an anonymous online survey in Russian (see the Appendix for an English version of the survey translated for this article) between October 2019 and January 2021, with most of the responses collected in two stages: October 2019–February 2020 and October–November 2020. The gap between the two stages coincided with the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which itself became a prolific source of humour all over the world, including in Estonia (see, for example, Hiiemäe et al. 2021). As Covid-19 humour was not the focus of the current study, we made a pause in data collection to ensure that other topics of Estonian Russian-speaker humour were proportionally represented in our dataset. Nonetheless, sometimes Covid-19 jokes were shared by survey respondents.

We used snowball sampling for data collection: we contacted the Russian-speakers in Estonia whom we knew personally and asked them to distribute the survey link among their friends and families. We also contacted Estonian cultural and education institutions that are connected with the Russian-speaking community and asked their employees to reply to the survey.

The survey consisted of several blocks. The respondents were asked to identify their favourite forms of humour (see Appendix for the list) and the most popular forms of contemporary humour.¹ Similarly, they were invited to indicate their favourite topics of humour and the most popular topics of contemporary humour. Then they were asked to submit the examples of humour that they liked and comment on their humourousness. Finally, there was a block of questions dedicated to the practices of humour sharing that included questions about the most popular sources of humour for our respondents, frequency, and ways of sharing humour as well as groups of people (for example, family, friends, etc.) with whom they usually share humour.

Based on previous studies, we assume that self-report surveys give an insight into the subjects' perception of their humour preferences and other humour-related behaviour. It is a quick and effective way of finding out what kind of humour people think they like to consume and share, and how they reflect on and perceive their use of humour in their daily lives. It also provided us with a selection of humour examples that people share with their friends and family. The study of self-reported humour can provide insights into how and why people use or avoid certain types and topics of humour (Fiadotava 2021). Relying on self-reported accounts of humour also helps to understand that emic perspectives on forms and topics of humour can be very different from researchers' perspectives (ibid.: 13). This can have important practical implications (Goodenough and Ford 2005) as it (re)-establishes the research participants' agency. In this way we can obtain information on the popular humorous topics, genres and practices, and also the data on people's ideas about humour consumption and attitudes towards different types of humour and their social appropriateness.

We received responses from 123 adult Russian-speaking Estonians (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Age and gender distribution of our survey respondents.

Age/Gender	Male	Female	Total ²
18–30	13.8%	32.5%	47.1%
31–40	4.9%	18.7%	25.2%
41–50	3.2%	15.4%	18.6%
51–60	3.2%	3.2%	6.4%
Over 60	0%	2.4%	2.4%
Total	25.2%	72.4%	

Data shared via the survey

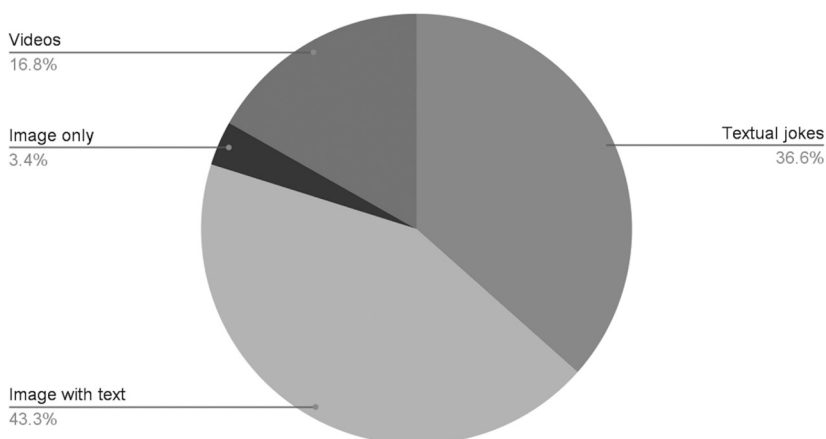


Figure 1. Forms of humour popular among Russian-speakers in Estonia.

We collected 268 humorous items as well as 21 references to humorous groups on social media, YouTube channels, stand-up comedians and comedy shows. Among the items that we collected there were textual jokes, image-based humorous items (with or without text) and videos (see Figure 1). 12 examples were identified as self-made while others were presumably either found/received online or heard during oral conversations.

The items were transferred from the survey form into an AirTable database (a platform that allows shared editing). The items were manually coded according to the form, topic, language and the presence/absence of references specific to Estonia or Estonian. Some of the items (especially longer videos) were attributed to several thematic categories; there were also cases when two or more languages were present in the same item.

As for the analysis, it is partly built on the quantitative distribution of data across different genres and thematic categories. We also conducted content analysis to find the most common topics, forms, practices of sharing and languages used. Finally, we performed a qualitative study of the most prominent tendencies that transpired in the survey responses.

ANALYSIS

Topics of Humour

Table 2. Popular and favourite topics across different socio-demographic groups (% of total number of people in that group).

	Topic/ group	Females under 40	Females 40 and over	Males under 40	Males 40 and over	Total
Favourite topics	Everyday life	96.8%	88.5%	91.3%	100%	94.3%
	Family life	68.3%	53.8%	52.2%	75%	61.8%
	Ethnic jokes	22.2%	23%	30.4%	37.5%	25.2%
	Politics	28.6%	34.6%	52.2%	50%	36.6%
	Religion	9.5%	15.4%	47.8%	0%	17.9%
	Education	42.9%	26.9%	39.1%	12.5%	37.4%
	Celebrities and popular culture	22.2%	26.9%	39.1%	0%	25.2%
Popular topics	Everyday life	58.7%	61.5%	52.2%	75%	59.3%
	Family life	46%	38.5%	43.5%	75%	45.5%
	Ethnic jokes	27%	26.9%	21.7%	37.5%	26.8%
	Politics	66.7%	46.2%	65.2%	75%	62.6%
	Religion	23.8%	3.8%	21.7%	37.5%	20.3%
	Education	30.2%	11.5%	17.4%	0%	22%
	Celebrities and popular culture	36.5%	26.9%	30.4%	50%	34.1%

The results indicate a discrepancy between the self-reported popular topics and favourite topics: for example, the most popular topic of contemporary humour was reportedly politics (62.6%), while 36.6% of the respondents marked it as one of their favourite topics. One of the survey participants commented on this discrepancy in the following way: “I have noticed that political jokes are gaining popularity now, but they don’t appeal to me” (female, 18–25 years old). As the figures in Table 2 illustrate, the gap between politics as a favourite topic and politics as a perceived popular topic is indeed the most visible in the socio-demographic group to which this participant belongs, specifically, younger females. However, in all the other groups we can observe the same tendency, even though it is less pronounced: people tend to list politics among the popular top-

ics more often than among their favourite ones. Among the humorous examples that we received, just 8.2% of the items belong to this category. Politics was almost absent from the examples of self-made humour that we received via the survey. The political topics mentioned in the humorous examples that our respondents shared mainly revolve around either Russian politics or international political events and characters (especially people who frequently become the targets of humour all over the world, such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson). Our respondents rarely referred to Estonian politicians and political issues. Some also commented on the choice of political joke they had shared, for example, by indicating that a meme is appealing to them because it denigrates a politician they dislike. This self-reported link between personal political preferences and shared political humour, coupled with the low number of references to Estonian politics in our dataset, shows that Russian-speakers in Estonia either do not engage with Estonian politics very actively, or prefer not to reveal their political preferences to researchers.

On the other hand, everyday and family life were listed among our respondents' favourite topics (94.3% for everyday life and 61.8% for family life), as well as among the topics that our respondents consider popular (59.3% for everyday life and 45.5% for family life). This trend was confirmed by the fact that these topics were also among the most popular to be shared with us (see Figures 2 and 3). In her comments, one of the respondents provided her reasoning for the popularity of this category, saying that it reflects "emotions that one feels in everyday life: such jokes are understandable and funny for everyone" (female, 26–30 years old). The predisposition towards this topical area may thus be explained by respondents' willingness to find common ground for the appreciation of humour, both with their family/friends/colleagues with whom they can share such humour, and with researchers as everyday life humour would not require extra explanation. While this tendency (the high popularity of everyday life humour over ethnic and political humour) cannot be considered a clear marker of Estonian Russian-speakers' integration in Estonia, it indicates that political issues – and the humour revolving around it – are not located at the forefront of our survey respondents' communication.

**«Смех и секс продлевают
жизнь. Занимайтесь
сексом. Поржать можно и
на пенсии!»**

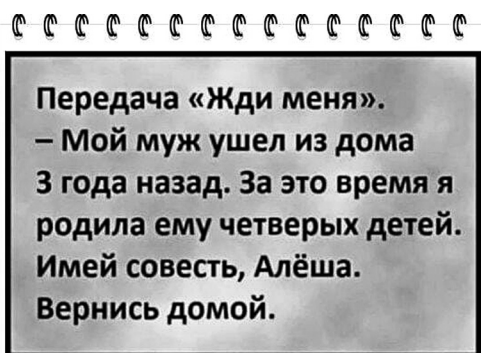


Figure 2. "Laughter and sex prolong life. Have sex. You can laugh when you are retired!" In Russian, shared by a female, 18–25 years old.

Figure 3. The popular Russian TV program Wait For Me, a talk show where people search for missing relatives and friends. "My husband left home three years ago. I have given birth to four of his children since then. Shame on you, Alyosha. Come back home." In Russian, shared by a male, 46–50 years old.

Several respondents also mentioned more specific topics than those present among the survey options. Among them there were professions (medicine, history), hobbies (fishing, hunting) and animals (in general, cats in particular). Even though several people (3.3%) added “Covid-19” to the list of popular topics in our survey, none of them indicated it among their favourite topics.

Some respondents (4.9%) also mentioned black humour among their favourite topics, but only one respondent explicitly suggested that this is one of the popular topics of humour. On the other hand, there were people who underscored that they do not like any forms of black humour. While from the researcher’s perspective black humour is not a topic but rather a feature of humour that can be applied to humour on various topics, for 4.9% of our survey respondents black humour is an important thematic category.

Some of the thematic categories transpired more prominently in certain forms of humour. For example, ethnic jokes were almost exclusively confined to text (87.5% of the ethnic humour examples that we received consisted of text only). Many took the form of canned jokes³ and constituted variants of Soviet-period ethnic jokes targeting for example Chukchi, Jews, Estonians (the latter appeared in 28.6% of the ethnic canned jokes that we have received, mainly ridiculed for their alleged slowness, see Krikmann 2009): “‘seems like a hare has just run past...’ Two hours later, ‘no, it was a raaaabit...’ Two more hours later, ‘let’s stop aaaaarguing, you hot-headed Estonian guys.’” (Female, 46–50 years old, in Russian)

On the other hand, celebrities and pop culture featured more noticeably in image-based humour (47.6% of humorous items on this topic are image-based) and in video form (42.9%) than in the textual form (see Figure 4). Based on this tendency we can conclude that the more contemporary targets were ridiculed using the more contemporary forms of humour. Similarly to the political humour in our dataset, pop cultural references feature Russian and American (internationally known) characters and celebrities. Whereas among the examples of political humour there were at least a few dedicated to Estonian politics, in this topical category Estonian references were entirely absent. This aspect of our dataset indirectly reaffirms the assumption that Russian-speakers in Estonia are less likely to consume Estonian popular culture and find recognisable references there.

Хотел быть похожим на любимых персонажей, но они стали похожи на тебя.



Figure 4. "You wanted to look like your favourite characters, but they started looking like you." In Russian, shared by a female, 18–25 years old.

The popularity of some topics depended on the demographic status of the respondents. Understandably, people aged 18–25 listed education (i.e., humour revolving around school or university, jokes about teachers and students) among their favourite topics more frequently than people aged 26–40 and those over 40 (66.7%, 24% and 23.5% respectively), and included it among popular topics more often. People aged 18–25 also said they liked humour about popular culture and religion more than older people. In contrast, one of our older respondents, a woman aged 46–50 years, mentioned that some topics related to contemporary gadgets and popular culture are not understandable for people aged 30 and above. People aged 18–25 had a more pronounced preference for political and ethnic humour. People aged 26–40 had a slightly higher preference for everyday life and family humour than younger and older respondents.

FORMS OF HUMOUR

Table 3. Popular and favourite forms of humour across different socio-demographic groups
(% of total number of people in that group).

	Form/group	Females under 40	Females 40 and over	Males under 40	Males 40 and over	Total
Favourite forms	Canned jokes with a punchline	33.3%	80.8%	43.5%	100%	49.6%
	Memes and other images	84.1%	57.7%	70%	37.5%	73.2%
	Videos	57.1%	38.5%	60.9%	25%	52%
	Jokes created by respondents and their family and friends	50.8%	15.4%	52.2%	50%	44.7%
	Practical jokes	3.2%	7.7%	34.8%	0%	10.6%
Popular forms	Canned jokes with a punchline	9.5%	53.8%	26.1%	62.5%	26%
	Memes and other images	93.7%	73%	91.3%	75%	87.8%
	Videos	71.4%	61.5%	65.2%	37.5%	65.9%
	Jokes created by respondents and their family and friends	20.6%	7.7%	30.4%	12.5%	19.5%
	Practical jokes	6.3%	7.7%	21.7%	12.5%	10.6%

Favourite and popular forms of humour overlapped in the responses. This also resonated with the proportional distribution of different genres of humour that we have received via the survey: images and image macros (images with captions) were the most recurrent examples. Within this category, image macros clearly dominated constituting 92.8% of image-based examples while images without captions accounted only for 7.2% of examples in this category. Noticeably, 44.4% of the images without captions were self-made (such as Figure 5).



Figure 5. Shared by a male, 26–30 years old.

Such a preference for image macros among our respondents is not surprising given the global popularity of this genre. One of our respondents (male, 18–25 years old) also provided an emic explanation for this: “memes are a concise genre that fit a paradox in two sentences plus a visual. It’s handy.” Some respondents also acknowledged that memes are not individual image macros but a series of related items, and thus they indicated that they like not the individual image macro but the series it belongs to.

While almost half of our respondents mentioned canned jokes with punchlines among their favourite genres, only 26% of them considered them popular (though this percentage varied significantly across different age groups, see Table 3). A similar tendency can be observed in relation to the jokes created by respondents themselves, or by their friends or family members: 44.7% included them in their list of favourite forms, but only 19.5% listed them among recurrent forms. Most of the respondents also said that image-based and video forms are popular and named these among their favourites. Pranks tended to be the least liked and the least popular among our respondents: only 10.6% included this form as their favourite, while the same number of people listed it as popular. 5.7% of respondents added “stand-up [comedy]” to the list of suggested favourite and/or popular forms of humour.

PRACTICES OF SHARING

Sharing humour is a common practice among our respondents: 31.7% of them reported that they tell jokes or share humour online several times per week, and another 30.1% said that they do so every day. Some respondents mentioned that they share humour on occasion or when they come across something particularly interesting. The need for a humorous item to resonate in some way with a person for them to share it also echoed in many of the comments that our respondents made in the field where we asked them to reflect on why they liked the examples they shared via the survey and why they found them humorous. Respondents linked these humorous examples to the general

context of their lives, often using words such as “relevance”, “topicality”, “closeness to life”, “reality”, etc.

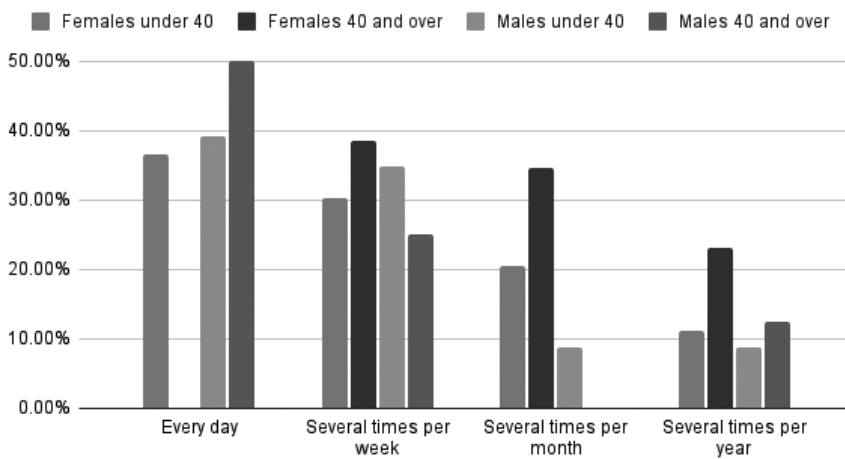


Figure 6. Frequency of humour sharing among different socio-demographic groups.

Most of our respondents share humour with their friends (82.9%) and family members (62.6%) (cf. Jess Dominguez’s [2023] findings that people are most likely to share memes with their closest relations). Fewer also share humour with colleagues or classmates (38.2%). There were respondents who indicated that their humour sharing practices are the same among friends and among family members, but others mentioned differences in sharing humour with these two groups. Those who mentioned these differences commented that they are more likely to share transgressive or crude jokes (for example, sexual, anti-religious, political, etc., jokes) with friends than with family members. Therefore, the range of topics that many respondents shared with friends was broader than the topics shared with family: sharing humour with family was often confined to everyday and family topics. Respondents were also more likely to share jokes containing obscene words with friends than within a family. Some of the respondents explained that the differences in humour sharing stemmed from the variations in political views (i.e., friends have the same views, but the family members do not) or in humour tastes (different family members prefer different types of humour). Others, on the contrary, noted that some humour topics would be avoided with (certain) friends, for example, jokes on national topics are not told to friends who belong to other nationalities, or more intimate jokes, which were reserved for the family circle. There were also those who commented that the divide lies along generational lines rather than being between friends and family, for example, older generations might not understand the jokes that are shared both among siblings and with friends. In addition, the gender divide was also mentioned (for example, “female stories” are not told to a husband). Finally, several respondents noted that the differences in humour sharing depend not on the age, gender, or belonging to a family or circle of friends, but rather on the individual characteristics of the particular person with whom humour is shared.

Among the sources of humour that our interviewees mentioned, Facebook came up most frequently (59.3% of respondents), followed by YouTube (53.7% of respondents). This distribution reflects Estonian residents' social media preferences (Mesipuu), including Estonian Russian-speaker preferences (Juzefovičs and Vihalemm 2020). The third most popular source of humour was interpersonal: hearing jokes from family members or friends or inventing them oneself (48.8% of respondents). This was followed by the Russian social media network Vkontakte (37.4%), Instagram (36.6%), joke/meme aggregator websites (17.9%), TV (15.4%), news websites, newspapers and magazines (10.6%) and X (formerly Twitter, 7.3%). Some of the respondents also mentioned Tiktok, Telegram and 9gag. The sources of humour that respondents shared with us via the survey (when respondents indicated the source) were mainly family members, friends, social media feeds and groups (not only humorous, but also professional), comedy shows on YouTube, search engines, etc.

The distribution of sources of humour that our respondents used varied across different age groups (see Figure 7). The ratio of joke/meme aggregators, news media, TV and Facebook increased in the older age groups while YouTube, X, Instagram and particularly Vkontakte were more popular in younger groups. Interestingly, the number of people who hear or receive humour from their family and friends is at its highest among the youngest age group. The number then decreases in the 26–40 age group and increases again among the over 40 group.

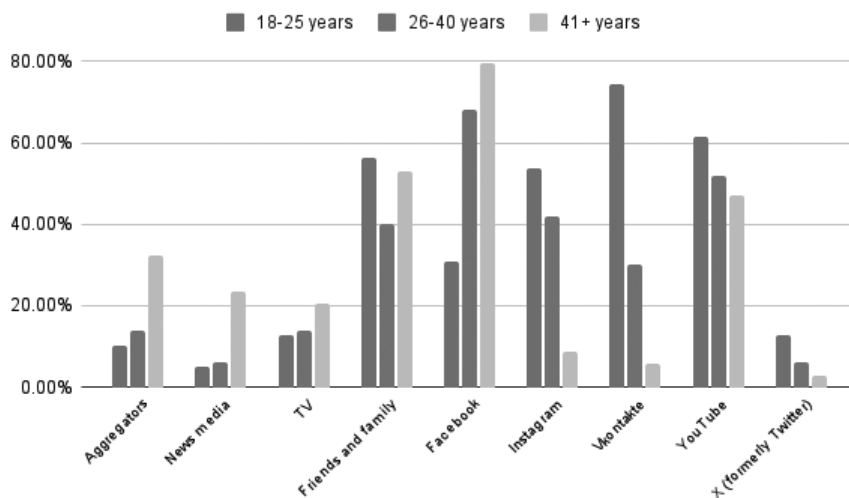


Figure 7. Sources of humour divided by age group.

When asked about the ways they use to share humour with their family and friends, most of our respondents replied that they share it privately via social media such as Facebook and Vkontakte (69.1%), tell them orally (54.5%), show humorous items to them on a gadget screen (53.7%), send them in messenger apps such as Skype, WhatsApp etc. (44.7%). Only 20.3% chose the option of public reposting in social media.

Given the heterogeneity of the Russian-speaking community and their different degrees of adaptation and integration, we were expecting a greater linguistic diversity in their humorous practices. Much research has shown trends towards translanguaging and code-switching, not only between Russian and Estonian, but also towards a multilingualism that includes English (Verschik 2021).

However, Estonian Russian-speakers illustrate a clear preference for humour in Russian with 98% of text jokes, 77.6% of the image macros and 64.4% of videos being in Russian, although the latter form did invite more content in English (17.8%). While comic TV shows were mainly in Russian (KVN, Krivoe Zerkalo), stand-up comedy was both in English (Tig Notaro, Brendan Grace) and in Russian (Aleksandr Dolgopolov), or Russian translations of stand-up in English (Kevin Hart). Some of the political videos – those commenting on American politics – were also in English. The share of the items in Russian and English also varied across different age groups (see Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage⁴ of the items shared in a certain language from the total number of items shared by respondents per age group.

Language	Over 40 years	26–40 years	18–25 years
Russian	90.9%	83.2%	77.2%
English	3%	16.8%	18.8%

The importance of Russian in humour appreciation for Russian-speakers was also seen in the fact that almost all examples of humour that included puns were in Russian (97.4%) with the only example (2.6%) that was in another language being in English (see Gan 2015 on the popularity of puns in English).

Notably, not a single item was solely in Estonian: three examples had elements in Estonian, but Estonian appeared alongside Russian, English and other languages.

When we were launching the survey, we expected that problems in integration would be reflected in the content of the humour. However, only 10 items out of 268 (3.7%) in our dataset mention Estonia (or particular regions thereof), the Estonian population or the Estonian language, and even fewer were specific to the cultural context of Russian-speakers in Estonia. The majority of these examples were shared by people under 30 years old. The jokes that had any connections with Russian-speakers in Estonia were related to Estonian and the alleged pressure on Estonian Russian-speakers to speak Estonian (Figure 8). Those respondents who referred to Estonians generally reproduced Soviet-era text jokes about slow Estonians (cf. Laineste 2008; Laineste and Fiadotava 2017). Just one text joke in our dataset was set in a specific location (Tallinn, the capital of Estonia), and revolved around a particular problem (the lack of parking spaces, see Figure 9).

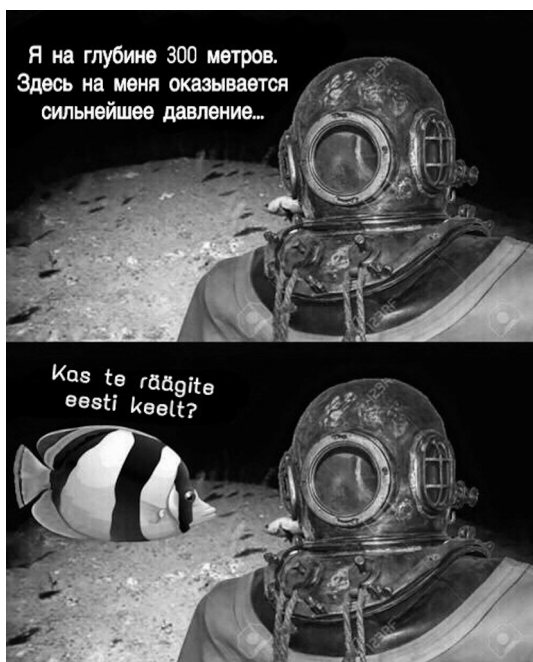
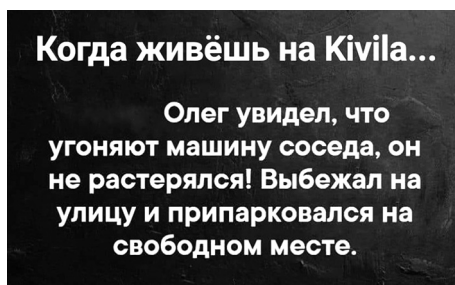


Figure 8. "I am at a depth of 300 metres, here I feel the strongest pressure... / Do you speak Estonian?" In Russian and Estonian, shared by a female, 18–25 years old.

Figure 9. "When you live on Kivila street... Oleg saw that someone was stealing his neighbour's car, but he wasn't at a loss. He ran outside and parked his car in the free space." In Russian, shared by a female, 18–25 years old.



Humorous items that targeted Russia (the country itself, its people, or particular politicians) or the Russian language, or demanded knowledge of the Russian context (for example, the Russian education system) were slightly more numerous (24 items out of 268 in our dataset). Given the media consumption patterns outlined above, and the fact that 65% of Russian-speakers in Estonia consider themselves well-informed about events in Russia (Juzefovičs and Vihalemm 2020: 4), the existence of humour revolving around Russian realities is hardly surprising. Such humour was shared with us by people belonging to different age groups. Similarly to the text jokes about Estonians, some of the text jokes in this category derived from Soviet-era humour (mainly shared by the respondents who are 45+ years old and probably remember them from their youth); in one case a survey respondent even stated explicitly that the joke she was sharing belonged to the period of perestroika in the USSR: "A German took his luxury Mercedes to a car repair shop in Russia. He got it back with the body of a Moskvich and the engine of a Zaporozhets..." (Female, 46–50 years)

There were also humorous items that referred to more recent Russian politicians such as Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, but they were not frequent. Unlike jokes from the Soviet era, they were more diverse in format and included text jokes, image macros and videos.

DISCUSSION

Humour can be conceptualised as one of the ways of expressing collective vernacular opinions and negotiating inter-ethnic relations (Davies 2011). Previous research has shown that Estonian as well as Latvian Russian-speakers use political humour to resist the essentialisation and simplification of their ethnic identities (Juzefovičs and Vihalemm 2020), which is especially relevant in the context of the cosmopolitanism of the younger Russian-speakers living in Estonia (Toots and Idnurm 2012) and can be observed in the trends towards multilingualism in their humour consumption. Humour proves to be a cultural resource that helps to create and maintain local identities, thus increasing resilience and subverting integration and assimilation.

Our data show that the favourite self-reported topics of humour are everyday and family life, the most recurrent formats are image-based jokes (memes), and the practices of sharing are directed primarily at friends and family (RQ1). The data also point out that the humour of Russian-speakers in Estonia is different from the humour of the Estonian-speaking majority due to its language and the choice of sources (RQ2).

The practices of sharing resonate with the results of the study of the Belarusian families' digital sharing practices, where only 8.6% of survey respondents indicated that they used public sharing of humour among their family members (Fiadotava 2020: 101). Understandably, the ratio of the people choosing this option is higher in the current study as the question implied sharing humour not only with the family members but also with friends. Therefore, we may conclude that the Estonian Russian-speakers' practices of sharing humour are not culture-specific to this group.

Given the long-standing, historically complicated relationships between the Russian-speaking minority and Estonian-speaking majority in Estonia, as well as the problematic aspects of Russian-speakers' integration into Estonian society, it might be tempting to look at their humour as a way of expressing inter-ethnic tension. However, the data that we have collected illustrates that Russian-speakers in Estonia are reluctant to list ethnic and political humour among their favourite, and most shared, topics of humour; and even among the examples of political and ethnic humour that we have received, few answers reflect the respondents' ethnic-political situation or their position in Estonia.

In fact, most of the ethnic humour found in the survey consists of old canned jokes from the Soviet period. While the results showed that the popularity of, for example, memes, videos, and practical jokes declines in older age groups, canned jokes have the opposite distribution and are most liked by those over 40. This supports Ol'ga Shcherbakova's (2019) findings. Her research among young Russian adults showed that today they rarely use canned jokes in their daily communication and rather associate them with the older generation. The meaning of these jokes to Russian-speakers in Estonia might be different from the meaning they used to have in the context from which they originated, and might perform a different function for them (cf. Steir-Livny 2015 on Holocaust jokes) – an interesting direction for further research. The tendency of the younger age group to prefer the more contemporary forms of humour (memes, videos) created by their family or friends is an interesting one and we can hypothesise that it might relate to the fact that young people are more keen to express their need to belong via humour (on the crisis of belonging in contemporary society, see Donskis 2011).

The notable absence of humour on Russian-speakers' minority status in Estonia could have several possible explanations: either the issue of their minority status is not important enough for our respondents, or they prefer to discuss it in a serious or at least non-humorous manner, or they consider humour on this topic too context-dependent and sensitive to share even via an anonymous survey (especially given that they might be aware of repressions against those who share online content in Russia that does not fit official Russian propaganda). The influence of political correctness cannot be excluded either, since it is a powerful mechanism that can change words, phrases and topics "from acceptable fodder to untouchable subjects" (Healy 2016: 138). Our survey respondents have also mentioned this trend, for example, a respondent aged 18–25 (gender undisclosed) left a comment that it is okay for the minorities to joke about themselves, but it is unacceptable for outsiders to joke about a minority that they do not belong to. Another respondent (female, 18–25 years old) noted that "it is difficult to generate jokes now because some people can get offended by anything". Such awareness of political correctness might also partly account for the popularity of jokes on everyday life topics as, unlike political, ethnic or religious humour, jokes about everyday life are less likely to violate the unseen boundaries of politically correct communication. Another possible explanation is that the use of political humour activates when triggered by public controversy (Basu and Zekavat 2021; for a case study, see Elsayed 2021), such as the ambiguous pre-election posters discussed by Jānis Juzefovičs and Triin Vihalemm (2020); although even in this case much of the humour recontextualised the posters from the domain of the ethno-political to that of everyday life. The few jokes in our sample that reflect the minority status of Russian-speakers in Estonia focus on the language aspect, which is one of the most tangible symbols of integration (or the lack of it). In these cases, we can see a playful exaggeration of Estonian integration policy, which forces Russian-speakers to study Estonian.

Language is an important factor in sharing and spreading humour. As shown in this study, Russian-speakers in Estonia clearly prefer Russian-language humour, although a declining trend in the use of this language is detected in the younger age group. Nevertheless, the decrease in the usage of Russian in the younger age cohort is accompanied by an increase in English, not Estonian, humorous items. The fact that our respondents chose not to share examples of humour in Estonian suggests that Russian-speakers in Estonia either do not follow humorous (social) media in Estonian, or do not consider the content funny enough to share with researchers. This is one of the indications that the integration of Russian-speakers into Estonian society is not always successful on the everyday level and that connections with Russia are stronger in terms of media consumption (cf. Introduction). These data need to be contrasted with broader sociolinguistic studies that cover other communicative contexts, according to which the population of Estonia is becoming increasingly multilingual (Verschik 2015) and young Russian-speakers more frequently speak Estonian and English (Verschik 2005), even in predominantly Russian-speaking areas (Zabrodskaja 2006). In the face of these developments, the prevailing preference for Russian-language entertainment media may mean a need for a differentiation in their cultural vernacular, regardless of the sufficient knowledge of the Estonian language and culture. Serious messages that are transmitted in humorous forms (Denisa-Liepniece 2017: 83) from the Russian cultural space in turn influence how Russian-speakers conceive Estonia and Estonian policy, but also their agency in shaping the country's present and future.

The interest in and focus on certain topics depends on the broader socio-political context (Davies 2011). While at the time of our data collection there were no major events involving Russia and/or Russian-speakers (in Estonia), political and ethnic topics were less clearly represented in the media and everyday discourse (unlike in 2022, when some changes especially in topics of humour were prone to arise, although this needs to be confirmed through further study).

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this article we investigate the humour preferences of Russian-speakers in Estonia in terms of production, consumption, and sharing in order to get a more complete picture of humour in Estonia. Our results indicate a discrepancy between self-reported popular topics and those marked as favourites. In particular, politics was reported to be a popular topic, although only a third of respondents cited it as such. The topics mentioned revolved around Russian or international political affairs, but few referred to Estonian politics.

The popularity of and preference to certain forms of humour depended on the age of the respondents: the older participants listed canned jokes among their favourite and among the popular forms more often, while younger cohorts opted for image-based humour, videos and jokes created by their friends and families. As for sources, age was a relevant factor in the distribution of sources of humour. YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and particularly the Russian Vkontakte were popular with younger groups. Finally, we detected a clear preference for humour in Russian, which we were not expecting given the heterogeneity of the Russian-speaking community and their different degrees of adaptation and integration. Respondents shared very few humorous items in Estonian, and all of these included elements in other languages such as English or Russian.

Our data point out that the humour of Russian-speakers in Estonia is different from the humour of Estonian-speaking majority due to its choice of topic, source and language. However, we also detected that Russian-speakers' humour barely mentions their ethnic-political situation and shows strong connection with Russia in terms of media consumption.

Among the important limitations of the current research are the sampling method, the type of data that can be obtained via a survey and the influence of contextual factors on the data obtained. The sampling method determined the probable prevalence of a demographic group among the respondents that the authors also belong to (middle-class urban dwellers who either have a higher education or are obtaining it). Moreover, the proportion of young and female population is rather high in our sample. Therefore, the results of the survey cannot be extrapolated to the entire Russian-speaking population of Estonia, rather they give a glimpse of self-reported preferences in humour among this social group. The prevalence of females among survey respondents limits the possibility to make conclusions on gender preferences in humour. In addition, wanting to keep the survey concise, we did not enquire about important factors such as how long respondents had lived in Estonia, nor about their command of Estonian. The very nature of the online survey also imposes certain limitations: despite the anonymity

of the survey people might be reluctant to share humour on contested topics, including political and ethnic ones. Finally, given the important role that news and other contextual factors play in defining contemporary vernacular expressions (Frank 2011), the data obtained during a relatively short-term survey reflects humour preferences in the given moment. As no large-scale inter-ethnic scandals were present in the Estonian public sphere during the collection period, ethnic humour could have been overshadowed by the other topics in our respondents' daily humour production and consumption. For example, in the event of conflict or war – as in the situation with Ukraine in 2022 – shifts in the attitudes of Estonian- and Russian-speakers in Estonia are likely to take place. Similarly, it would be important to understand from future studies if and why Russian-speakers in Estonia follow the Estonian media, specifically the humour productions spread by it (and if they do not, why). A series of follow-up studies to be conducted over the coming years should alleviate this shortcoming.

APPENDIX

Humour survey

Hello,

This survey is part of the Estonian Literary Museum's research on jokes and humour. In it, we will ask you to tell us about what forms and topics of humour are currently popular, and what kind of humour you prefer.

We will also ask you to give examples of jokes/canned jokes/memes, etc. These can be examples from any source: from the Internet, from what you have heard from your friends, family, etc. These examples can also be in absolutely any form: text, images, audio, video.

The survey contains several types of question. In some, you need to select options from a list; sometimes you will be asked to insert a link or a joke text; and for some questions we will ask you to answer in your own words.

Participation in the survey is anonymous. You do not need to provide your last name, first name or contact details. You can opt out of completing the survey at any time without giving any reason. Refusal to complete the survey will not entail any negative consequences for you. All information you provide will be used solely for academic research purposes. For more information, write to us at humour.research@yandex.ru.

The survey will take approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.

If you wish to participate in the survey, please provide your consent here:

I certify that I am an adult and voluntarily consent to participate in the survey.

1. Your gender
2. Your age
3. What are your favourite topics for jokes?
 - Education;
 - Everyday life;

- Family life;
 - Ethnic jokes;
 - Politics;
 - Religion;
 - Popular culture, jokes about movie stars, sports stars, etc.;
 - Other (please indicate).
4. What are currently the most popular joke topics?
- Education;
 - Everyday life;
 - Family life;
 - Ethnic jokes;
 - Politics;
 - Religion;
 - Popular culture, jokes about movie stars, sports stars, etc.;
 - Other (please indicate).
5. If you want to add a comment on the topic of contemporary humour, please write it here.
6. What are your favourite formats of humour?
- Canned jokes with a punchline;
 - Memes and other images;
 - Videos;
 - Jokes created by you or your friends/family members;
 - Practical jokes;
 - Other (please indicate).
7. What are the most common formats of humour?
- Canned jokes with a punchline;
 - Memes and other images;
 - Videos;
 - Jokes created by you or your friends/family members;
 - Practical jokes;
 - Other (please indicate).
8. If you want to add a comment about contemporary formats of humour, please write it here.
9. Please provide examples of jokes/memes/humorous videos, etc., that you like. Add the texts or links to these examples here or upload the files in the next question.
10. Please provide examples of jokes/memes/humorous videos, etc., that you like. Upload the files here.
11. Why did you like these examples of humour? What exactly made you laugh?
12. Where did you find/hear these examples of humour?
13. Where do you usually find the humour you like?
- Facebook;
 - Vkontakte;
 - X (formerly Twitter);
 - Instagram;
 - YouTube;
 - Websites dedicated to jokes/memes, etc.;

- News sites/newspapers/magazines;
 - TV;
 - I hear them from friends/family members or make them up myself;
 - Other (please indicate).
14. How often do you tell/share jokes, memes or other examples of humour?
- Every day;
 - Several times per week;
 - Several times per month;
 - Several times per year;
 - Other (please indicate).
15. Whom do you share humour with most often?
- With friends;
 - With classmates/colleagues;
 - With family members;
 - Other (please indicate).
16. How do you usually share humour with your friends/family?
- I share it via instant messages (Skype, WhatsApp, etc.);
 - I share it via social networks (Facebook, Instagram, etc.);
 - I share it on my newsfeed on social networks;
 - I tell it orally;
 - I show it on my phone/computer screen;
 - Other (please indicate).
17. Is there a difference between the humour you share with your friends and the humour you share with family members? If yes, what is it?
18. Can you upload example(s) of humour you have created yourself (photos, videos, etc.)?
19. If you want to include additional comments about jokes and humour, please add them here.
20. How did you hear about our study? (Answering this question will help us reach more respondents.)

NOTES

1 In the results, we have differentiated between favourite (which the respondent likes) and popular (which the respondent thinks other people like) topics and forms.

2 The sum does not equal 100% because some of the respondents chose not to disclose their gender.

3 The canned joke with a punchline (known as *anekdoty* in Russian) is a popular genre in Russian-language discourse; it is defined as a “short funny oral story about a fictional situation with an unexpected ending and recurrent protagonists that are known to all Russian-language-speakers” (Shmeleva and Shmelev 2002: 20).

4 The total number is smaller than 100% as there were items shared in Estonian, as well as items without any text (just images).

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