

Seminar

Folk humour and humour literacy on the outskirts



PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS

May 19, 2026
Long House of the Hiiumaa Museum
(Vabrikväljak 8, Kärkla, Hiiumaa)

Programme

9:00-11:00 - Session 1 “Ethnic humour in and around Estonia”

Chair: Anastasiya Fiadotava

Piret Voolaid “Hiiu humor: looking at tricksters through a distorted mirror”

Risto Järv ““We talk about everyday things, but we tell them our way.” Hiiumaa island guides on their humour strategies”

Liisi Laineste “They are human, after all: Hiiumaa in Estonian ethnic jokes”

Jan Chovanec “Czech-Estonian Humour Connections: Laughing at cross-linguistic taboo”

11:00-11:30 - coffee break

11:30-13:00 - Session 2 “Ethnic humour of Estonia’s neighbours (sort of)”

Chair: Liisi Laineste

Anastasiya Fiadotava “Making fun of Belarusian periphery: similar scripts, new targets and settings”

Sergey Troitskiy “‘Moscow is more visible from the pine tree’: the cultural reputation of the Poshekhonians”

Władysław Chłopicki “Polish joke borderlands. The cases of Highlands and Silesia”

13:00-14:00 – lunch at Rannapaargu Restoran

14:00-16:00 - Session 3 “Ethnic humour from further away”

Chair: Piret Voolaid

Katarina Šrampf Vendramin “Humour, Otherness, and the Periphery: The Case of Lemberg”

Rok Mrvic and Sasa Babic “With a Mask in One Hand and a Joke in the Other: Ribnica humour in the Shrovetide Context”

Guillem Castañar and Carmen Maiz Arevalo “The Spanish brother-in-law as a key of Spanish humorous discourse and folklore”

Bostjan Nedoh “Ambiguity of ethnic humour”

17:30 - ferry to the mainland

Abstracts

Hiiu humor: looking at tricksters through a distorted mirror

Piret Voolaid, Estonian Literary Museum

The presentation explores the features of Hiiu humour and the ways this humour helps the Hiiumaa islanders' take advantage of others. The world is full of places known for their topsy-turvy sense of humour, where people identify with a humorous reputation. One of such places is Hiiumaa. Hiiu humour is a world turned upside down: through this funhouse mirror, life appears more sensible than when viewed straight on. "Reversed" — that word belongs to Hiiumaa as naturally as wind and the sound of the sea.

People of Hiiumaa are still, in a good sense, hostages of their own myth — they know they are believed to be cunning, stubborn tricksters with their own dialect and slow thinking, but in their stories the one who wins is the one with a sense of humour.

Hiiumaa humour isn't just entertainment shaped by wind and sea; it is an ancient form of survival. Beneath it lies a deeper pattern known in world cultures as the trickster. The trickster is one of the most universal figures of oral tradition — breaking rules, deceiving and being deceived, inventing and dismantling, destroying and creating, standing beyond good and evil, and able to be wise and foolish, transgressive and boundless all at once, depending on perspective.

Trickster in Hiiu humour appears in two interconnected forms: as a clever protagonist in narratives who ultimately outwits others, and as the real-life islander whose sharp, laconic, and unexpectedly witty remarks turn everyday conversation into a subtle act of humorous victory. If humour is the mirror of a people, then Hiiumaa reflects this in the cunning, inventiveness, and dignified defiance of its small community.

“We talk about everyday things, but we tell them our way.” Hiiumaa island guides on their humour strategies

Risto Järv, Estonian Literary Museum

Hiiu humour – often described as “telling jokes with a straight face” – relies on wordplay, ambiguity, and situational shifts between expected and actual meaning. Hiiumaa tour guides and local hosts spoke about their humour as part of their work during the author’s earlier fieldwork (2009–2011). Humour often does not reside only in the content of jokes, but in how things are said – in telling things in their own way, in the phrasing, timing, and situational adjustment of speech.

Guides’ humour does not constitute a fixed repertoire but an emergent practice shaped by the interaction between performer, audience, and situation. It cannot be “produced on demand”, but arises in the course of situated communication. It is closely tied to language use, especially the local Hiiu dialect, which contributes both to the comic effect and to the construction of authenticity.

In the guides’ and hosts’ narratives, humour fulfils several social functions: it operates as a form of self-irony and a marker of local identity, enables playful oppositions with neighbouring Saaremaa and mainland Estonia, and helps regulate interaction between guides and visitors. The effect depends on the listener’s ability to recognise shifts in meaning. At the same time, humour can easily shift into something taken seriously, where certain humorous narratives may be perceived by visitors as plausible folklore, contributing to the emergence of new “local legends.”

They are human, after all: Hiiumaa in Estonian ethnic jokes

Liisi Laineste, Estonian Literary Museum

This paper examines Estonian ethnic jokes about geographic peripheries, focusing primarily on the island of Hiiumaa famous for its mutual joke culture with the neighbouring Saaremaa. These jokes constitute a well-established subgenre of Estonian humorous folklore, but besides depicting the other as stupid or idiosyncratic, it foregrounds some less universal characteristics of the target group. Building on Christie Davies' theoretical framework of ethnic joke cycles, the study approaches the data as a form of ethnic humour that relies on known oppositions (e.g., clever-stupid) but adds a twist of local identity work.

Based on data from joke collections, archives, and contemporary online sources, the analysis identifies recurring narrative patterns, character types, and linguistic features specific to Hiiumaa jokes. The paper argues that humour about this Estonian island serves less to exclude than to symbolically manage the relationships between the two peripheral islands. In the contemporary setting, folkloric humour is successfully commercialised and used to create local identities.

Czech-Estonian Humour Connections: Laughing at cross-linguistic taboo

Jan Chovanec, Masaryk University

The presentation discusses cross-linguistic humour that arises from an accidental juxtaposition of lexical items that, while meaningful in two languages, have divergent meanings for the two language communities. The talk showcases the 2024 publicity campaign run by the AirBaltic company to celebrate the 30th anniversary of its operation. As part of the campaign, the Latvia-based company asked the public to choose the names of new aircraft by voting from a list of names of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian cities. While the campaign attracted some interest from people in the Baltics, the situation changed when the Czech public discovered that the name of one of the Estonian cities is a cross-linguistic taboo in Czech, and started voting heavily in favour of this candidate, which eventually won the competition. The talk suggests that while humour based on cross-linguistic taboo may be seen as a rather trivial form of silliness and mirthful glee, once such a practice becomes coordinated via social media it becomes more than that. The online mobilization, facilitated by the viral spread of information in the digital sphere, is a form of banal nationalism in which the online community affirms their belonging to a specific linguistic/cultural community, bonding over the shared humorous practice and taboo-related humour.

Making fun of Belarusian periphery: similar scripts, new targets and settings

Anastasiya Fiadotava, Estonian Literary Museum

As soon as Belarusian folklorists started collecting humour, they discovered that the Poleshuks – inhabitants of Polesie, a swampy region in southern Belarus and northern Ukraine – are a wide-spread local ethnic target. The most common script associated with this ethnic group has been a stupidity script, and they fitted well into Christie Davies's (1990) centre-periphery theory of ethnic humour. Alongside the more general label "the Poleshuks", several more specific groups from Polesie region have been targeted in Belarusian humour. In the 19th century, one of these groups were the inhabitants of Markavichy village that lies not far from the modern Belarusian-Ukrainian and Belarusian-Russian borders. Later the villagers from Sporava started appearing among the joke targets, largely inheriting the same stupidity scripts but introducing new elements to the joke settings. Finally, Auciukoucy came into the spotlight of Belarusian ethnic humour at the turn of the 20th and 21st century primarily due to the efforts of writer Uladzimir Lipsky who has published several books about their humour. Despite in a way continuing the tradition of Poleshuks jokes, some of the humour targeting Auciukoucy portrays them of cunny rather than stupid. Aucikoucy are thus trying to adopt the role of "wise fools" in Belarusian humorous folklore.

"Moscow is more visible from the pine tree": the cultural reputation of the Poshekhonians

Sergey Troitskiy, Estonian Literary Museum

The folklore and cultural construction of the empire, connected with the political construction of the empire, is associated with the reabsorption of regions located between the Center and the periphery. The inhabitants of the Poshekhonye region (the coast of the Sheksna River) turned out to be marginalized and rediscovered in folklore. The Sheksna River flowed from the White Sea to the Volga. The Finno-Ugric tribe Meryans lived in this region, and from the 9th century the Slavs settled this region. As a result, the inhabitants of these territories differed from the inhabitants of the metropolis, which contributed to the formation of a certain cultural reputation for them - "own outsiders". They have gained a reputation for being stupid, slow and inept people. However, technological progress, namely 19th-century media, print media, and popular literature, played a major role in consolidating and spreading this reputation. In the presentation, I will talk about the features of the cultural reputation of Poshekhonians, their humorous perception, and the role of the media.

Polish joke borderlands. The cases of Highlands and Silesia

Władysław Chłopicki, Jagiellonian University

Poland has been a country of ever moving borders. This is why the centre-periphery theory advanced by Christie Davies has been difficult to apply to some jokes (e.g. the Jewish stupidity jokes were unique worldwide due to the uniqueness of Eastern borderland shtetls). In this presentation I will discuss two of the cultural borders in Southern Poland which have been more stable, although the political frontiers there still moved throughout history. Both Highlanders of the Tatra foothills and Silesians of the Upper Silesia region have been the subject of stupidity jokes, but both of them were cunning in their own way as well. Both of them are cohesive groups who look down on outsiders (calling them “cepry” and “gorole,” respectively), but are also looked down upon by the Polish cultural mainstream, although for different reasons. Both of them have unique dialects which are obligatorily used in the jokes, the Highlander one being typically rural, while the Silesian one representing urban life. Both groups are highly conservative and religious, although both emigrated for economic or political reasons - Highlanders to America, while Silesians to Germany. The distinctiveness of the groups has a political dimension, too: Highlanders never wanted to be politically independent, while Silesians have fought for autonomy for decades and have recently failed again (for the ninth time) with the President of Poland vetoing the law on Silesian language as a minority language again. I will compare “baca” (head shepherd) jokes and miner jokes and show how these different borderline backgrounds surface in the jokes and are essential to understand them.

Humour, Otherness, and the Periphery: The Case of Lemberg

Katarina Šrampf Vendramin, ZRC SAZU

This paper focuses on folk humour portraying the inhabitants of Lemberg as a Slovenian version of *Schildbürger*—figures of mockery associated with absurdity, inversion, and exaggerated otherness. Lemberg was a historically prosperous market town, yet it is located on the geographical periphery of Slovenian territory, close to the Croatian border. This combination of local economic prominence and peripheral position made it a particularly suitable target for humorous narratives circulating primarily among the surrounding rural population, but also more widely. The paper analyses jokes and humorous stories in which Lemberžani are depicted as foolish, wealthy yet ridiculous, showing how humour operates through paradox and exaggeration as a folk-humorous genre that produces otherness and negotiates micro-level social hierarchies, tensions, and boundaries within a peripheral region.

With a Mask in One Hand and a Joke in the Other: Ribnica humour in the Shrovetide Context

Rok Mrvic, ZRC SAZU

Sasa Babic, ZRC SAZU

The study is situated within broader research on Ribnica's cultural tradition and critically engages with contemporary processes of humour heritagization, particularly the initiative to inscribe Ribnica humour in the Slovenian Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage. We aim to identify some recurring formal, thematic, and pragmatic patterns of humour performance in Ribnica during the Shrovetide festival, thereby reassessing claims of Ribnica humour as a distinct and locally specific phenomenon in comparison with humour practices elsewhere in Slovenia. Our study also seeks to help clarify how different forms of humour have developed within various Ribnica's social groups, identifying both shared features and points of divergence. Methodologically, the analysis combines two synchronous perspectives: an external perspective of a researcher attending the festival and an internal perspective of a researcher who co-creates the festival with the local community. The empirical material consists of selected cases of predominantly verbal humor, analyzed with particular attention to their content and performance strategies.

The Spanish brother-in-law as a key of Spanish humorous discourse and folklore

Guillem Castañar, Tallinn University

Carmen Maiz Arevalo, Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Humour frequently uses family relationships as privileged domains for playful role reinterpretation and conflict (Coimbra, 2015). Family relationships are often played as “character types” recurrent in jokes and narratives (e.g., the fool or the trickster). However, while kin in-law roles like the mother-in-law are easily recognised and stable stereotypes in other European folklores and humour (Bakanova, 2024), there is no direct evidence in the literature of a stereotype identical to the contemporary Spanish “cuñao” (brother-in-law). This character type condenses attitudes about masculinity, social class, political common sense and (often) specifically Spanish communicative styles into a figure that is both mocked and socially recognizable, serving both as affiliative and aggressive humour. The archetype and the social phenomenon coined as “cuñadismo” seems to have been popularised in the last decades, mostly thanks to the influence of social media, but it has been partially present in the Spanish vernacular joking tradition for centuries (Pons 2020). The aim of this study is to address the crystallization of this archetypical figure in contemporary Spanish culture and its potential challenges when using it in other cultures (Tatoj, 2023). To do so, we gathered a multimodal corpus of 100 items and carried out a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Results show that this stereotype agglutinates different archetypes like the know-it-all, the braggard or the political populist together with having its own set of linguistic features (e.g., marked prosody, colloquializations, vocatives, etc.).

Key words: Spanish “cuñado”, archetypical humorous figures, multimodality.

References

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Ambiguity of ethnic humour

Bostjan Nedoh, ZRC SAZU

According to Freud's theory of jokes, obscene jokes generally belong to the subgenre of tendentious jokes. Tendentious jokes are defined as jokes told not for their own sake, but in service of aggressive tendencies that are culturally repressed. Specifically, obscene jokes are outcomes of psychic energy that was not expended in the repression of aggressive or sexual cathexes. Marginalized ethnic communities, such as ethnic minorities, are often the objects of such aggressive tendencies expressed in obscene humour. Specifically, these groups become objects of humour because they are fantasmatically (stereotypically) perceived to embody the transgression and enjoyment on which the dominant culture imposes repression—such as theft, dirtiness, misery, laziness, and so forth. By analysing examples mainly of Roma ethnic humour, this paper will show how obscene jokes not only reinforces stereotypes attributed to ethnic minorities—thereby contributing to racist community-building—but also reveals what is repressed within the dominant culture.