

# The Hungarian joke and its environs<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Hungarian humour went through significant changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the urban middle-class way of living and culture had developed by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had to coexist all over the country as well as in ethnic Hungarian territories abroad with the traditions of rural culture and folklore until the middle of the century (and, in locked-up areas, till the end of the century). Consequently, Hungarian humour is made up of two important layers of folklore: popular funny stories that have been developing among the peasantry for centuries, and jokes, a genre that emerged from urban oral culture in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dualism of folk-based and urban culture has been a decisive feature of Hungarian culture during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the question arises: more than a hundred years later, are there still any fundamental differences between the two types of humour in terms of their ways of thinking or their subject matter, or can we regard Hungarian humour as a unity? In this paper, we compare the thematic categories of popular and urban humour based on the analysis of two large collections. Next, we examine the popularity of major joke categories in Internet sources. Finally, we offer a brief introduction to the contemporary stock of Hungarian jokes by thematic groups.*

*Keywords: Hungarian, joke, humour, popular, urban.*

“No description of any people depicts a nation’s life, character, and prevalent ideas so authentically as it can display itself in its jokes and anecdotes.”

(Jókai 1854.)

## 1. A short history of jokes

The collection and the study of funny stories and jokes began centuries earlier in the Western countries of Europe than in Hungary as the formation of the middle class in those countries had started earlier. In the town of Arezzo in Tuscany, Poggio Bracciolini, better known as Fiorentino, published his collection of anecdotes entitled *Liber Facetiarum* in 1380. It is given a special flavour by the fact that the author collected and formulated his full-blooded, rakish stories, so rich in Renaissance humour, as a secretary to the Pope, as a sort of by-product of his theological activity. Considering their structure, these stories are quite different from jokes today: they are much less dramatic and have an epic and educational character. In 17<sup>th</sup> century England, philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Cowley already wrote treatises on the joke (the wit) as one of the humorous genres of literature (Eröss 1982: 157–158).

The oldest known layer of Hungarian humorous stories is linked to the personality of King Matthias.<sup>2</sup> A part of them was recorded by the Italian humanist Galeotto Marzio (Martius 1934), who, as a member of the King's closest entourage, was granted a seat at the King's table. He had a chance to record King Matthias's legendary apposite sayings and acted as an eye- and ear-witness. King Matthias the Righteous was a popular hero of folk tales and historic legends: out of all the great personalities of Hungarian history, he is the one whose memory and figure has been the most vividly present in folklore.

The first person to collect Hungarian anecdotes and humorous stories consciously was a romantic novelist who is most widely read even today, Mór Jókai. In his inaugural address delivered at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, entitled *On Hungarian Folk Humour*, he mentions three and a half thousand (later as many as seventeen thousand) anecdotes, which he had partly recorded from hearsay, partly had received in readers' letters as a newspaper editor. Many of these had been incorporated into his novels, but later on, in 1856, he also compiled an independent collection of them while publishing them continually in his humour magazines. The other fundamental work of reference is Béla Tóth's collection of anecdotes in five volumes (1888–1903) (Tóth 1986). A large portion of the humorous stories collected by Jókai derived from contemporary folklore. In the voluminous collections published later on, an increasing number of anecdotes virulent amongst urban, more educated groups of society also appeared besides popular folklore stories cultivated by the peasantry.

A good indicator of the belated middle-class formation in Hungary is the fact that genres of urban folklore appeared only as late as in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> With the unification of Pest, Buda, and Óbuda in 1873, Budapest became the tenth largest city on the continent by the turn of the century, though only every third of its inhabitants was born in Pest or Buda. Immigrants accounting for two thirds of the population had arrived from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as well as from the neighbouring countries, representing a tremendous linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and social diversity. The rootlessness of the immigrants made the city susceptible to accepting different influences, and, since one of the characteristics of jokes is their readiness to ridicule *otherness* (Heller 2002: 3–5), *the Budapest joke* ('pesti vicc') found a rich breeding ground in this whirling and colourful diversity.

We venture the remark that the *peculiarity* of 'pesti vicc' lies, among others, in the fact that, in the traditional sense of the word, the type of man characteristic of (Buda)pest, as such, does not exist. It could only be a genetic phantom, as Budapest has been continuously mixing and whirling right from the moment of its emergence, it is simultaneously melting together and differentiating into layers, and an ethnic group or cultural circle may become a trendy token figure of our city, then disappear on the peripheries in no time.

(Erőss 1982: 14–15.)

This is the reason why 'pesti vicc' has grown to be so varied.

Compared to the residents of other big cities, the citizens of Budapest remained provincial for a longer time, as most of the immigrants at the turn of the century moved into the throbbing city from the countryside. The new city dwellers strengthened the folkloristic character of the joke, not so much because of the folklore elements they had brought with them from their rural home, but through the oral tradition, which was an organic part of their everyday life. The jokes were repeatedly transformed in the urban oral culture, and in the world of clubs, casinos, cafés, cabarets, and horse races, they found their way back from written to oral culture. In the course of this circulation, they became familiar to all layers of society. The most successful stock jokes were handed down orally from generation to generation, whereas more and more humour magazines were also published. In the 1860–1870s, altogether 120 (!) humour papers were sold in Pest alone, while in 1912, there were 24 of them – the majority of them written, published, as well as read in Pest (Erőss 1982: 35–36, 50).

Contemporaries emphasize two specificities of the Budapest culture at the turn of the century: the multitude of cafés and nightclubs and the special genre called 'pesti kabaré', i.e. the cabaret of Pest. In 1896, 570 cafés operated in the city of 600,000 inhabitants. Cafés represented a way of life; lawyers, reporters, men of letters, personalities of the theatre were their frequent visitors. These people did not simply "pop in"; they spent their whole day in the café, they lived there from morning till dawn. This was the place and the way where and how a new stratum of society, urban intelligentsia was born, and this was also the most typical birthplace and habitat of 'pesti' humour. As a product of modern mass culture, the joke found a powerful market in the show business of the big city in the years of peace preceding World War I: "The entire Budapest is nothing but a West European metropolis in Hungary... we are the slaves of night life here, we only go to Vienna to sleep," a contemporary writes in 1896 (Lenkei 1896, in Erőss 1982: 50). "...a tremendous contribution to the rapid spreading of the Pest joke was made by the extraordinary popularity of the Pest cabaret, a genre based on quick jokes and a jesting performance". The Pest cabaret is a uniquely mixed cocktail of genres expanding the string of jokes and anecdotes into a theatrical experience (Erőss 1982: 55–56).

The Pest joke and the Pest cabaret are still thriving today, although the intensity of their prosperity has varied. There have been peaks and valleys, but all in all, we can observe that jokes proliferate both in a calm and relatively balanced political atmosphere and during tragic periods of history as in the years of the World Wars. The latter also generated their special, tragi-comic black humour, which helped people to survive. This attitude resonates with the philosophical, often grotesque, evil-tongued, and merciless nature of the Pest joke.

## 2. The joke and its environs: questions concerning the genre

The joke is a genre of urban folklore. It is short, hard-hitting, and highly dramatic. It is associated with city dwellers; it adjusts itself to the hectic pace and the happenings of urban life. The laughing stock is usually one or another group of the society, defined by their profession, origin, gender, age, or social standing.

The predecessors and the contemporaries of jokes were the genres of folk humour: anecdotes, funny stories, humorous folk stories. All of these were narrative stories with short dialogues and were better prepared and more elaborated verbally than the jokes. They focused on smaller, clearly defined local groups, with frequent verifying elements. They were the genres of the countryside where feudalistic structures survive. Anecdotes were popular among the upper strata of society, retaining their literary roots even after their transition into a folklore context. For the Hungarian nobility, informal social events providing an occasion to tell anecdotes still served as the most common form of entertainment until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Popular stories and other funny stories were genres mainly characteristic of the peasantry. According to the definition of *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon* (Hungarian Encyclopaedia of Ethnography), the popular story is “a short, striking, epic prose genre, maintaining a cheerful tone. Its characters are not concrete historical personalities, rather representatives of an abstract type, e.g. *the Gypsy, the bootmaker*, etc. The popular story does not claim concrete authenticity. It abounds in amusing turns, has a light style and often uses the tools of irony and mockery” (Szemerényi 1977: 32). The community events offering an occasion to tell tales and stories were primarily times of collective work (spinning, feather plucking, corn-shelling) and village festivals, which gradually lost their ground with the disappearance of the traditional peasant lifestyle and as a result of the forced collectivization of the agriculture in Hungary in the 1950s. However, the sweeping transformation of the peasants’ way of living did not take place overnight, but happened step by step. After the collectivization, in the process of adapting to the new organization of work, new story-telling occasions emerged, which entailed significant transformations in the genre: long, epically well-elaborated traditional fairy tales were replaced by shorter and faster forms of funny stories (Vöö 1962: 1107–1109).<sup>4</sup> Though both types were aimed at, and had the function of, entertaining the audience, fairy tales and legends required a lengthy, detailed interpretation with deep empathy, while the popular stories were built on a punch line and their recital was faster, to-the-point and it used unexpected twists. Understanding them demanded less shared knowledge; therefore, they could also function in heterogeneous groups, not only in traditional, closed village communities.

The gradual shift from the realm of the popular fantastic to the spheres of reality created transitory genres, with humour being their connecting link. Some of them were longer with a more epic character, like tall tales, village-mocking stories, and anecdotes based on historical subjects, while others have a more concise, more dramatized structure built on a punch line, like popular stories or jokes themselves.<sup>5</sup> Popular stories were favoured by peasants. They had multiple links to more traditional folklore genres in terms of formal elements as well as motives: their subject derived from rural life, their motives often showed the influence of folk tales, and some folk tale characters also appeared here, such as priests and Gypsies, landlords, and servants, artful dodgers and profligate wives, just to mention a few (Magyar 2009: 17–19).

In this way, popular funny stories have come to be organically incorporated into the body of genres of Hungarian folklore as a whole. Jokes, on the other hand, though they have a lot in common with popular stories, and have conquered the whole of the social spectrum, are basically

the genre of the urban middle class, and especially the intelligentsia. Unlike the former genre, the latter is not associated with a geographically and culturally homogeneous community defined by its own traditions, but rather it is generated by an ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially heterogeneous and permanently changing environment (see ‘pesti vicc’ above). Therefore, it makes use of motives, attitudes, and characters of different cultures (even subcultures); it spreads extremely rapidly and, as a result, the stock of jokes has a strikingly international character.

### **3. Hungarian folk humour and urban humour**

As pointed out in the introductory remarks, Hungarian culture – and within that, Hungarian humour – went through significant changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the urban middle-class way of living and culture had developed by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had to coexist all over the country as well as in ethnic Hungarian territories abroad with the traditions of rural culture and folklore until the middle of the century (and, in locked-up areas, till the end of the century). Consequently, Hungarian humour is made up of two important layers of folklore: popular funny stories that have been developing among the peasantry for centuries, and jokes, a genre that emerged from urban oral culture during the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dualism of folk-based and urban culture has been a decisive feature of Hungarian culture in the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the question arises: more than a hundred years later, are there still any fundamental differences between the two types of humour in terms of their mentality or subject matter, or can we regard Hungarian humour as a unity?

#### **3.1. Comparing jokes and popular funny stories**

In the following, we will compare the material contained in two collections that were published at the turn of the 20th century, primarily from a thematic point of view. On the one hand, we draw on the work by József Köves (1999) entitled *A legnagyobb vicckönyv*, featuring 10,000 jokes. While preparing the volume, besides his own corpus, the author also relied on material included in formerly published Hungarian and foreign collections. For this reason, we have no certainty as to what extent the material at hand is contemporary and to what extent it is Hungarian.<sup>6</sup> We are, however, obliged to put up with this, as Hungarian joke-research, still in its infancy, has not yet published a reliable and authentic collection of jokes. The other subject of comparison will be *Szilágysági dekameron*, a collection of popular funny stories by Zoltán Magyar (2009), which includes the author’s self-collected popular funny stories.

Table 1. Thematic content of jokes and popular funny stories.

Subject/character	Joke	Popular funny stories
characters	Gypsy Székely Jew	Gypsy Székely Jew
laughing stock	Scots	village mockers ('Rátót sagas')
loonies	mentally ill psychiatrist sick-nurse	the village idiot
profession	physician restaurant keeper policeman	priest soldies excise officer policeman/gendarme
innate silliness, ignorance	policeman aristocrat	village mockers ('Rátót sagas')
boozing	drunkard	popular stories on wine drinking
marital status jokes	young Maurice pupils marriage mother-in-law	childhood stories pupils indecent stories
sexuality	erotic and pornographic stories	indecent stories
absurd, grotesque	absurd jokes	tall tales
historic events, famous people	political jokes anecdotes	historical popular stories

As indicated by Table 1., the larger subject areas that jokes and stories use to organize their material basically correspond to each other.<sup>7</sup> The typical joke subjects and joke characters show basic similarities even if the targeted typical professions vary; or if village idiots are not officially mental patients, but rather the clowns of the village community; if it is not the policemen but the residents of the neighbouring village they would laugh at; if their jokes are not really “political”, but ridicule the local potentates.

### **3.2. Presentation of the contemporary stock of jokes according to their main subject matters**

Web-based sources allow us to obtain an up-to-date picture of the jokes currently in circulation. This method has the advantage that we are dealing with fresh data which has not been distorted by transit times of collection and printing – although the lack of editing and expert selection constitutes a disadvantage. We have examined the material included in one of the largest web-based collections of Hungarian jokes (Vicclap.hu) and looked into the popularity<sup>8</sup> of the different

joke categories. The following table shows the frequency of the different joke categories in a decreasing order. Naturally, the categorization of texts according to their subject is not always clear-cut.

Table 2. Frequency of joke categories.

Subject	Number of items
marriage	1,661
obscenity	1,075
child	866
doctor, psychiatrist, lunatic	821
blonde	811
policeman	767
politics	495
mother-in-law	420
traffic	411
workplace	372
pub	355
Gypsy (Roma)	345
computer	340 <sup>9</sup>
Scot	315
Jean <sup>10</sup>	269
Székely	268
soldier	240
Jew	230
lawyer	108

### 3.2.1. Minorities

All the 843 jokes classified in this category are associated with ethnic groups and minorities that the majority of Hungarian population has been living together with for centuries: Gypsies and Jews. They appear in the traditional Hungarian folklore as positive figures who, in spite of their subordination and helplessness, are clever enough to turn their subordinate status to their own advantage and outwit the powerful (landlord, priest, policeman, gendarme). Gypsies and Jews are present both in rural and urban environments, though Gypsies are more characteristic of the villages and Jews live typically in towns (since the beginning and especially since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). One dimension of the jokes is clearly linked to a locality. In the case of the Gypsy jokes, some of the typical scenes are the Gypsy shanty, the Gypsy row, the forest, the fair, the local parish, the church, the pub, all of which can be linked to the rural way of living. The jokes that are set in restaurants typically tell about Gypsy musicians. This segment of the Hungarian Gypsy population mainly lives in towns and they rarely appear in jokes: only 12 out of the Roma jokes in *A legnagyobb vicckönyv* (The Great Book of Jokes) are about musicians. Though it is with towns that soldiers, courts, and prisons are mostly associated, the scenes of these jokes vary, and show a high degree of independence from the place of residence. Sometimes typical characters convey a setting by themselves: the village constable, the game warden, the village parson, the Gypsy marketer, the voivode are characteristic figures of the

village, while the job centre attendant, or the registrar evoke an urban environment. Examining the jokes from this point of view, it can be stated that the Gypsy is basically featured as a village character. The Gypsy is traditionally the most popular figure of the Hungarian joke repertory. He (usually a male character, seldom a female) appears in the most varied situations. His figure is a likeable, fallible, and congenially artful character both in folklore and in fiction. As Jókai wrote in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

There is another race here that is virtually molten into the humour of the Hungarian people, which, wherever it should turn up, stands as a symbol of joke and grotesqueness, and this is the poor, cheerful, patient Gypsy. Alas, how many cheerful hours this poor fellow had given us Hungarians! His lighthearted poverty, humorously thought-of misery, his humility mixed with mockery, his Diogenesian wisdom, Asian laziness, inexhaustible cunning, resourceful guile, and ready observations provided landlords with a vast treasury of stories and tales to tell. The Gypsy has always been the more cheerful part of people's life.

(Jókai 1854.)

In more recent jokes and contemporary popular stories, however, the Gypsy is often no longer a positive character; it is rather his alleged laziness, trickery, and theft that appear as characteristic stereotypes:

Example 1.

*Gazsi hears from others that in the developed Western countries people only have to work one day a week. So he travels to Germany and asks the first person he bumps into:*

*Excuse me. Is it true that people have to work only one day a week here?*

*Yes, and it is in the middle of the week, on Wednesday.*

*And tell me, please, every Wednesday?*

(Köves 1999: 122.)

Example 2.

*The Gypsy is walking across the meadow. On his way, he meets the game warden.*

*Good morning, Gypsy. Where are you going?*

*A hen? Me? Oh, c'mon.*

(Köves 1999: 124.)

The permeability between the popular folk story and the joke is illustrated by a story which features in both genres (as a popular folk story in Magyar 2001: 98, and as a joke in Köves 1999: 124). Another piece of evidence for the close relation is the more epic character of Gypsy jokes.

As for humorous stories focusing on the Jews, they constitute a different matter: these funny folk stories are mainly about playing tricks on Jews and ridiculing their traditional customs. Jew *stories* highlight the cultural differences between mainstream society and the Jewish group, whereas Jew *jokes* tend to draw on the negative stereotypes the majority has in relation to the Jews: money-minded thinking, miserliness, cunning. Let us look at some examples:

Example 3.

*Old Kohn wants to buy Coke from the vending machine at the airport. He inserts a dollar coin and presses the button. Nothing comes out. He inserts another dollar, presses the button, and still no luck.*

*Clever, very clever, the old man says.*

(Vicclap.hu.)



Example 4.

*Kohn submits a request to have his name changed to Kovács. To the clerk's great surprise, only one week after the change is done, Kovács (formerly Kohn) submits another request to have his name changed, this time to Szabó.*

*I understood why you had your name changed to Kovács, the clerk says. But why do you want to change it from Kovács to Szabó?*

*Well, what will happen if I introduce myself as Kovács and they ask me what my name was before?*

(Vicclap.hu.)

Another group of the Jew jokes has been absorbed from the Jewish culture. They reflect what is generally considered to be the characteristic Jewish way of thinking and attitude to life, and their humour arises from the self-irony so inseparable not only from this culture<sup>11</sup> but from humour in general (the latter being often retaliatory, aggressive, including self-deprecating one):

Example 5.

*On his deathbed, Sam asks Rachel:*

*Rachel, were you here with me when the Nazis took away our first shop?*

*Yes, I was, Sam.*

*Were you with me when we were taken to the concentration camp?*

*Yes, I was with you.*

*Were you with me when the Nazis took away our second shop, too?*

*Yes, I was with you then, too.*

*And are you here with me at my deathbed?*

*I am here now, too.*

*Rachel, Rachel, you don't bring any good luck.*

(Vicclap.hu.)

Most of these jokes feature exclusively Jew characters. Typical figures are the wise rabbi and the yeshiva student. In the Hungarian jokes, it is usually the proper names Kohn, Grün, Schwarz, and Weiss that make the ethnic character of the joke unmistakable. The settings and the contexts are also typical: the rabbi's home, the deathbed, the bank, the shop, the bath, the restaurant, and the brothel. Some theories hold that the Pest joke was born from the marriage of the down-to-earth way of thinking of the Hungarian peasant and what they consider to be "the Jewish way of thinking" (Eröss 1982: 233); others regard the latter as a central element of the whole East-Central European region. "The Polish, Czech, Austrian and Hungarian jokes are very similar to one another; their common origin lies in the Jewish humour, which is famous for its self-mockery. Differences can be detected in the Biedermeier obsolescence of Vienna jokes and the proneness to abstraction of Czech jokes. The quality of Hungarian jokes is acknowledged all over Europe" (Voigt 1998: 324).

Thus, we can affirm that despite the relatively low statistical frequency of these jokes, the mentality manifested in the Jewish jokes had a great influence on Hungarian humour in general. We must not forget, however, that self-mockery is a common feature of jokes in general, as stated above.

The shrewd Székelys<sup>12</sup> traditionally appear both in jokes and in humorous folk genres with a frequency similar to Gypsies. In the whole Hungarian linguistic area, the Székelys are known for their wily way of thinking, being quick of mind but slow with words, as well as for their simplicity concealing a great deal of wisdom. The popular stories about these ethnic Hungarians also often contain an erotic content. In the new and unaccustomed urban environment, however,

(i.e. in the more recent layers of humour), the Székelys may be presented as fallible and awkward figures, who are ridiculous themselves. Now let us look at some cases in point:

Example 6.

– *Hey, brother, will you take me to Szentgyörgy?*

– *Sure I will.*

*They sit silently on the coach for hours.*

– *Is Szentgyörgy still far away?*

– *Well, it's getting further by the minute.*

(Köves 1999: 147.)

Example 7.

*The Székely child takes the dinner out to the field for his father. On getting there, he asks his father:*

– *Father, is Gergő Kovács a relative of ours?*

– *No, son, he is not.*

– *Father, is it certain that Uncle Gergő is not a relative of ours?*

– *I'm telling you, it is certain. Why are you asking?*

– *Just because he is in bed with my mother at home.*

– *Well, then he must be a relative of ours, son.*

(Köves 1999: 151.)

Example 8.

*Public opinion pollsters are working in the villages of Csík. They ask Uncle Mózes:*

– *So, Uncle Mózes, now that the price of bread has gone up again, how do you feel about that?*

– *I feel good.*

– *Could you be a bit more explicit?*

– *I feel bad.*

(Köves 1999: 154.)

### 3.2.2. *More remote groups: village mockers, jokes about Scots and aristocrats*

Mockery is a popular genre of Hungarian folklore; the Hungarian anthologies of folk poetry contain a considerable amount of mockers. Mockers are lyric songs or prosaic, epic works ridiculing a person, a quality, or an event (Szemerényi & Lajos 1977). So far, they have been classified only on the basis of their laughing stock in scholarly literature. We can distinguish woman mockers, profession mockers, lad mockers, maiden mockers, religion mockers, village mockers, and nationality mockers (Szemerényi & Lajos 1977). Mockers are characterized by exaggeration, irony, and improvisation. It is a very flexible genre, but now we will only examine its epic manifestation. The characters mocked are permanent figures, which are either entirely local or which refer exclusively to one particular community. Village mockers, which are popular in every region, typically ridicule the ignorance and clumsiness of the inhabitants of poorer nearby villages. In *Szilágysági Dekameron*, residents of Szilágysámson despise the neighbouring village, Szér, and its residents:

Example 9.

*Says the man from Szér: Open the gates, the yard needs airing.*

(Magyar 2009: 59.)

Example 10.

*In the old times, we used to say that we would know when the world would pass away, as in Szér it would pass away one day earlier. It was because the people in Sámson used to despise those in Szér. It was a very remote village...*

(Magyar 2009: 63.)

Quite surprisingly, Scots are also among the primary target groups of mocking in a lot of Hungarian jokes. It would be difficult to trace back the origin of their career in Hungary. In his monograph on the Pest joke, László Erőss suggests that the Hungarian urban humour was sensitive enough to accept and integrate fashionable trends. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the English style was considered trendy, and it was at the time that the English-type dry humour became popular. It is possible that jokes on Scots also originate from this period. The focus of *Scots jokes* is the legendary frugality of the Scots. Considering the lack of any real-life historical relations and hands-on experience between the Hungarian and the Scottish population, the function of these jokes may have been simply to ridicule this universal human quality:

Example 11.

*Two old Scotsmen are sitting about on a bench in the cemetery.*

*How old are you?*

*I am 78. And you?*

*I am 88.*

*Then for you it's not worth going home.*

(Köves 1999: 315.)

Example 12.

*The Scotsman was asked why he had bought his girlfriend a lipstick for her birthday. Because, says the Scotsman, this is the only present that I will gradually get back from her in small portions.*

(Vicclap.hu.)

This group of jokes also includes stories on human stupidity and ignorance in general. For some reason, people in Hungary tend to associate these qualities with aristocrats and policemen. However, these two groups emerged during different historical epochs. The *jokes on aristocrats* appeared as a way of mockery invented by the Hungarian middle class taking shape toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and they were directed at a social class high above them in terms of social status. Proper names play an important role in this group of jokes: Arisztid, Tasziló, and Anasztázia are recurrent characters. Their names convey an important stylistic message already, as the mere utterance of them evokes the image of those figures who are unviable and ignorant, who demonstrate a weak sexual performance, and who have that characteristically aristocratic speech defect (e.g. speak with uvular r):

Example 13.

*Did you hear the news? The chimney-sweeper was run over by a car.*

*Terrible. One can no longer be safe on the roof.*

(Vicclap.hu.)

Example 14.

*Countess Anasztázia asks her husband, Tasziló, on the morning after their wedding night:*

*Tell me, dear Tasziló, does what we have been doing cause such pleasure to everyone?*

*Yes, of course.*

*Even to the peasants?*

*Yes, to them also.*

*Don't you think it is too good for them?*

(Köves 1999: 80.)

Presumably due to their decreasing relevance, the popularity of jokes on aristocrats has dropped dramatically over the past decades. The most potent survivors of this group are the so-called Jean jokes. These are exclusively *formula jokes*, that is, they do not have an epic core, and the punch line is often based on a pun. Especially popular is the short, question-and-answer structure, in which the question and the answer, similarly to the absurd jokes, are completely incongruent with the situation:

Example 15.

– *Jean, will you water the flowers in the garden?*

– *But Sir, it is raining.*

– *Why, it does not matter, Jean. Take an umbrella.*

(Köves 1999: 85.)

### 3.2.3. Profession jokes

Historical changes swept away ignorance as a group characteristic from the aristocracy that lost its role in the society. However, interestingly enough, the new beholders of power “inherited” it along with their newly acquired authority. This is also illustrated by the fact that there are certain jokes which exist in two versions, one featuring an aristocrat as the main character, the other a policeman, e.g. in Example 13. In Hungary, jokes on policemen emerged after the Second World War, during the dictatorship of the proletariat. The policeman at that time was a representative of the political power, thus having power over life and death; so mocking them was a way for the vulnerable man of the street to get rid of his fear of the system. Therefore, *policeman jokes* can be classified among political jokes as well. In most cases, the stupidity and ignorance ridiculed in these jokes were based on reality; policemen were selected not on the basis of ability and qualification, but of their political reliability:

Example 16.

*The detective is interrogating a suspect:*

– *How did your marriage come to an end?*

– *I became a widower.*

– *And who died?*

(Köves 1999: 283.)

Policeman jokes have been one of the most popular types of jokes over the past decades; their unshakable popularity is illustrated by their frequency numbers in Table 2. As with Jean jokes, the question-and-answer structure of formula jokes is very common here, too. The zeugmatic structure is also quite often applied. Zeugma is a conceptual configuration in which the predicate refers to two words in two different senses: concretely to one of them and figuratively to the other. The stylistic effect arises from the fact that the dictionary meaning of

the words does not always correspond to their contextual meaning. From a pragmatic point of view, the basis of the humorous effect is the out-of-context, incongruent interpretation or behaviour:

Example 17.

*Why does a policeman buy a hatchet when his wife gives birth to a baby?  
He wants to carve a man from the child.*<sup>13</sup>

(Köves 1999: 280.)

The policeman (or earlier the *gendarme*), who often abused his power and pilfered something from the peasants' attic or cellar, figures in funny folk stories as well. Other representatives of the authority also appear: excise officers whose vigilance unlicensed brandy distillers always try to evade. The priest and the soldier, the two members of the village community who are not peasants themselves, are classical characters of the folk stories. Most of the funny stories about priests are priest mockers at the same time, and they can be classified as mockers as well. They mainly ridicule greed, miserliness, and hypocrisy:

Example 18.

*A priest was preaching: Brethren, don't do what I do, do what I say.*

(Magyar 2009: 93.)

Both in folk humour and in jokes, the priest and the Gypsy are often featured as a pair. In these examples, it is not the ethnic content, but the priest-mocking motive that is dominant. In these jokes the priest eventually came to be replaced by the doctor, a character more typical of modern city life. Jokes on physicians were popular in Budapest as early as in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Eröss 1982: 68). Typical stereotypes characterizing them highlighted money-grubbing and incompetence:

Example 19.

– *Well, says the doctor to the patient, you will have to lie in the hospital and undergo surgery.*  
– *Oh, no, I would rather die.*  
– *Look, sir, one does not exclude the other.*

(Köves 1999: 236.)

The *doctor-patient* and the *psychiatrist/psychologist-patient* jokes tend to merge together, at least according to the website entitled *Vicclap.hu*, which treats them as one thematic group. Sometimes it is really difficult to identify the difference between them, but the following joke is definitely an example teasing the psychologist profession:

Example 20.

*Two psychologists were walking in the street. A car suddenly runs over one of them. The uninjured psychologist leans over the other and asks:*  
– *Would you like to talk about it?*

(Köves 1999: 117.)

The popular funny stories about *village idiots* can also be grouped among mockers, as illustrated by the following example:

Example 21.

*A mother travels on the train with her imbecile child. The child looks out of the window.*

– *Mom, what is that?*

– *A cow.*

– *Where?*

(Köves 1999: 114.)

At the same time, jokes on the urban versions of village idiots, *loonies* are set in the upside down world of the mental clinic or the madhouse. Most of them have a punch line based on the implication that those inside and those outside are no different after all:

Example 22.

– *Doctor, I have dual personality. I am not me, as there are two of us.*

– *Hmm, (the doctor looks sternly at the patient), now will you repeat all of this, but only one of you should speak at a time.*

(Köves 1999: 118.)

### 3.2.4. Marital status jokes and children jokes

The marital status jokes and children jokes are, beyond doubt, the most common type of all. In our corpus, marriage jokes, erotic jokes, blonde jokes, pupil jokes, and mother-in-law jokes account for over half (4,838) of the jokes classified in 19 categories in total.

*Marital fidelity*, e.g., is a frequent and popular theme in such jokes. In the vast majority of cases, infidelity is found out by the spouse, and it is often mutual. We also learn from the corpus that sex is the number one reason for cheating, but still, it accounts only for less than half of the cases. The second reason is business. Accordingly, the forms of appearance of infidelity are far from being exclusively sexual. If we examine the corpus from the perspective of who is the most laughed at, we can see that husbands come first, and wives are only second.

We can also ask ourselves the question if jokes draw a different picture of men and women regarding their behaviour inside their marriage. Different jokes or even different variants of the same joke often state the same thing about husband and wife. Here are some of the common points that jokes attribute to men and women:

- The two sexes cheat repeatedly in almost the same proportion.
- Husbands and wives find out about their spouse's infidelity in an identical proportion.
- Cheating spouses and lovers of both sexes try to conceal infidelity in the vast majority of cases.

However, our research has also revealed many differences between the two sexes:

- The major difference is that the pair “cheating wife–cheated husband” appears in twice as many jokes than the “cheating husband–cheated wife” combination. This would imply that there are almost twice as many wives who cheat than husbands!
- Husbands change their lovers faster than wives.
- Extreme violence (murder/suicide) is much more common with men: as forms of appearance of cheating/betrayal and as a reaction when cheating has been found out.

- The difference between the two sexes is present in the ways infidelity is found out: catching the other in the act is typically a male way of finding out the truth, while recognizing a telltale sign is more characteristic of women.
- Men are more inclined to confess to cheating or to give themselves away: cheating husbands tell their spouses about their behaviour three times more often than cheating wives (Barta 2012: 199–200).

The category euphemistically referred to as *erotic jokes* and its folklore counterpart, indecent stories mainly include blue and obscene texts. In everyday Hungarian, this group has been dubbed piggy or swine jokes, as they contain dirty, bawdy texts.<sup>14</sup> Popular humour has always clashed with the middle-class standards that have become prudish and euphemistic in the course of the development of civilization: the former has retained its bare and brutally outspoken nature. The middle-class norms of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries even determined those cases when the rules could be transgressed. The history of Pest humour by Eröss describes the licentious life in the Budapest cabarets and music halls at the turn of the century, including the uncensored programme of the night clubs and their filthy, almost pornographic jokes (Eröss 1982: 57). Erotic jokes have been popular for a long time both in their urban and folklore versions, and, as shown by Table 2., they continue to be one of the most popular sources of humour even today.

The ‘*dumb blonde*’ is a new player in the international joke world. Our first documented encounter with a Hungarian joke about blonde women dates back to July 1999, when the first item of the kind appeared on the website *Vicclap.hu*. The fact that an exhaustive collection of Hungarian jokes published at about the same time (Köves 1999), a trove of 10,000 jokes and the largest collection printed to date, does not include this category at all is a further indication of the recent emergence of blonde jokes, insofar as the author relied essentially on collections that had already appeared in print when compiling the volume. Of course, attaching a date to a verbal genre is always problematic, for written documentation is preceded by a period of oral tradition of some length and one can only estimate how long a verbal phenomenon existed before breaking into the written world. It might have existed for a time in the 1990s, since a volume of jokes collected by the same author and published in 2002 (Köves & Köves 2002) includes nearly 165 blonde jokes. In 1999, there were only seven such jokes on the Internet, which, however, implies their earlier emergence. Nonetheless, it is likely that these jokes became massively popular around the turn of the millennium.

One look at joke categories is sufficient to show that blonde jokes are among the most popular ones in Hungary: they are ranked fifth regarding their frequency, topping the traditionally top-seated police, political, and mother-in-law jokes. The most important stereotypes associated with blondes and reflected in these jokes are stupidity and the violation of sexual morals. In this case, stupidity is not simply about making some occasional mistakes but rather, it is a congenital inability to think logically. According to these jokes, all blonde women are obtuse at all times.

Women have been the target of sex jokes and jokes about their role in the family (as wives or mothers-in-law) since time immemorial. However, the ‘*dumb blonde*’ differs from them in that she is generally young and single, and often a secretary. On rare occasions, she appears as a mother, but then she will be the mother of a little blonde girl, as evidence that blondness can be inherited. Then what kind of latent social problem does the sudden appearance and rapid spread of these jokes shed light on? In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the system of social expectations

regarding female and male roles lost its certainty as gender roles were altered in European society, and the accelerated rhythm of recent decades also triggered particularly acute changes.

A fundamental change has occurred in the life of the female. Thanks to their access to education and mass entry into the workforce, women have entered the public space that for centuries had been reserved for the male members of society. Thus, competitiveness and rivalry in the public realm are no longer specific to the internal relationships of groups of males, but have also redefined the outlines of the relations between the two sexes. In other words, women have appeared in a new role, that of the independent, self-sustaining individual demanding equal rights – one that might even be conceived as threatening to the integrity of the male community. The response is a symbolic assault in which men cast doubt on the intellectual and moral suitability of (blonde) women, in an effort to destroy their newly established self-esteem and identity (Géro 2008; Géro 2010a; Géro 2010b; Géro 2012).

Jokes on *mothers-in-law* constitute a significant group, and not only in the Hungarian material. As Legman puts it: “Mothers-in-law are the most curious and significant figures in all Western folk-humor” (Legman 1968: 437). Though according to the chronicle of Hungarian jokes they have a long history, a researcher predicted their extinction as early as in 1933 (Eróss 1982: 74). In reality, they are indestructible just like their central character, and they still occupy a strong position in our frequency table today. Several researchers observe that though a marriage involves two mothers-in-law, the jokes mostly mock that of the husband’s.<sup>15</sup> This is equally true for the Hungarian stock of jokes as well as for the German, the Russian, or the Spanish ones. What it has to do with is not the lack of mothers-in-law on the wives’ side, but rather the freedom of speech. Jokes are born among men and recited by men, so they primarily reflect the offences of men: it is their mother-in-law who speaks too much, who orders them about, who is offensive, dumb, ugly, old, and a horrible cook. All of the above provokes an extreme aggression in the son-in-law. He seeks her life, either in thought or in deed:

Example 23.

*There are two freshly dug graves in the cemetery, next to one another. At the foot of each stands a man.*

– *Wife?*

– *Mother-in-law.*

– *That’s not bad either...*

(Móré é.n.: 61.)

Among *children jokes*, many jokes pertain to the child’s unexpectedly apposite remark (the so-called ‘out of the mouth of babes’ jokes) and many are, in line with the age group, ‘pee and poo’ jokes. But the commonest children jokes are the Maurice jokes. Interestingly enough, the latter also belong to the group of Jewish jokes and most of them even have an erotic content. They are often organized in a question-and-answer structure, in which the dialogue is set between the (female) teacher and Maurice or Maurice and one of his parents. The humorous effect is elicited from the contrast between the innocence we would expect due to his age and the boy’s behaviour that belies this expectation:



Example 24.

*The teacher asks:*

– *Children, who can give me an example of harmony in married life?*

*Maurice raises his hand:*

– *My grandparents live in harmony. Grandpa snores and Grandma is deaf.*

(Vicclap.hu.)

### 3.2.5. Historical anecdotes and political jokes

In Hungary, the top position of the popularity list has always been held jointly by erotic jokes and *political jokes*. The predecessors of the latter were historical popular stories and anecdotes related to a historic event or a famous personality, and they have a long history both in peasant folklore and in higher literary tradition. Our first known funny anecdotes are linked to an outstanding Hungarian historical personality, King Matthias, who reigned in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Table 2., which displays frequency figures, suggests that nowadays jokes of this type are slightly being pushed into the background. But even today, this is the only area of Hungarian humour research, still in its infancy on the whole, in which serious, reliable, and professional collection work has been carried out beginning from 1945 (Katona 1994). In modern history, there have been some personalities (Mátyás Rákosi, János Kádár – both party leaders during the communist era) who inspired cycles of jokes about themselves, but the systematic collection of jokes of the post-transition period (1989 and after) has not been done yet. The current state of disillusionment with politics is also a fertile ground for new jokes to be created, as demonstrated by the following recent example:

Example 25.

*Two old ladies are feeding pigeons.*

– *You know, these pigeons are just like politicians.*

– *Why?*

– *While they're down on the ground, they eat from our hands, but once they begin to soar they shit on our heads.*

(Debrecenlive.hu.)

## 4. Conclusion

In Hungary, genres of urban folklore emerged only in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the time when a new social stratum, the urban intelligentsia, and, simultaneously, 'pesti vicc' (the Budapest joke) was born. Joke is a genre of urban folklore, which develops in an ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially varied and continuously varying environment. Due to the above, the Hungarian stock of jokes shows a rather international character. The predecessors and the contemporaries of the joke as a genre are the genres of folkloristic humour: anecdotes, popular funny stories, and folk histories, which are all linked to a locally and culturally homogeneous community cultivating the same traditions, and are organically integrated among the other genres of Hungarian folklore. As we have seen, popular funny stories and Hungarian jokes largely correspond to each other from a thematic point of view: their typical themes and typical characters show conspicuous similarities.

The findings of the frequency survey show that the greatest proportion of the jokes examined belongs to marital status and children jokes: they account for more than half of all

jokes classified in 19 categories. Minority jokes are linked to ethnic groups or minorities which the Hungarian majority has been living together with for centuries: their chief characters are the Gypsies, the Jews, and the Székelys (although the latter are actually ethnic Hungarians living in the present territory of Romania). Considering Gypsy jokes, there is a strong correlation between folklore anecdotes and urban jokes. The jokes on Jews are of two types: the first one reflects the negative stereotypes originating from the Jews' perception by the majority, while the second is constituted by borrowings from the Jewish culture. Some theories are of the view that jokes about and by Jews have made an important impact not only on Hungarian humour, but also on the humour of the whole Central European region.

Among profession jokes, particularly the policeman jokes have been topping the list for years. Since policemen are linked to power, these jokes can also be regarded as political jokes. According to the classification by source of humour, they belong to mockers as the new representatives of inherent stupidity as a group characteristic inherited from jokes on aristocrats so popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recent social changes are also reflected in the emergence of jokes on blondes, indicating that another social group is beginning to take over this stupidity role nowadays.

Besides erotic ones, political jokes have always been the most popular in Hungary. Their predecessors, the anecdotes linked to historic events or famous personalities, boast a long-standing tradition both in peasant culture and in higher literary tradition. The Hungarian joke also preserved this tradition until the change of regime in 1989: certain historical figures were surrounded by cycles of jokes. Frequency examination shows, however, that this type seems to be pushed into the background nowadays.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank Judit Pethő-Szirmai for her valuable comments and suggestions.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This article is a longer and modified version of a previous one: Géro & Barta 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Matthias (Hunyadi), King of Hungary 1443–1490.

<sup>3</sup> Cities that had developed earlier fell victim to the storms of history. During the Mongol invasion and the 150-year-long wars against the Turks, not only market towns but a large part of the villages were also destroyed in the central region of the country.

<sup>4</sup> In West European folklore, this change was completed as early as the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while among the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Hungarian popular culture, peasant storytelling lasted until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, or, in more archaic regions, even till the end of the century.

<sup>5</sup> Popular funny stories have long been pushed into the background behind more acknowledged folklore genres (tales and legends). The Hungarian folklore science has only paid attention to the important role they play in modern popular culture in the past few decades, therefore their collection and systematization have not yet led to any results that could be considered comprehensive and final.

<sup>6</sup> Compilers of earlier collections of popular stories, anecdotes, and jokes certainly also adopted foreign materials. Jókai (1854) mentions an anecdote that was translated from German,

evidence of which can be found in the German-type syntax, which is alien to the Hungarian language (*A magyar néphumorról*). In contemporary Pest and Buda, this must have been quite natural a practice.

<sup>7</sup> There can be different aspects of classification, though the thematic units of folklore collections often turn out to be identical. What we have found most suitable here is categorization according to situations of life and the characters and groups referred to by name. Of course, like in every such collection, there are also unclassifiable 'other cases' as well, but they remain beyond our scope now.

<sup>8</sup> We have not examined the popularity (evaluation) of individual jokes in the strict sense of the word, nor the number of occurrences (frequency) of individual jokes, just the number of jokes of a given subject appearing in a collection. That is why we do not make a difference between popularity and frequency in this article.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the material collected here is not jokes proper and from the point of view of genre classification, they cannot be grouped among jokes unambiguously.

<sup>10</sup> Jean, the butler, is the survivor of the jokes about aristocrats that mostly became obsolete by the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Papp 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Székelys are an ethnic group speaking Hungarian and living in Székelyföld, a part of Transylvania. Since 1920, the territory has belonged to Romania, but it has more or less retained its language and identity.

<sup>13</sup> In Hungarian, there is a saying (*embert farag valakiből*) which can be translated word by word in the following way: *to carve a man from somebody* meaning 'lick somebody into shape'.

<sup>14</sup> Here is another explanation for the name of the dirty jokes: "As to what are called dirty jokes, the bad conscience of the listeners and often of the tellers, as to this mutual comedy of *hostilities, disguised as an exchange of amenities*, is massively evident. Just to begin with, that is surely why such jokes are called 'dirty'" (Legman 1975: 29).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Barta 2012: 201.

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