Editorial: laughter and humour in communication

Sergey Troitskiy
Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, Russia
sergtroy@yandex.ru

Aleksandr Lavrentev
Udmurt State University, Russia
lavrentyev@bk.ru

Alyona Ivanova
Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University
Mental Health Research Centre, Russia
ivalenka13@gmail.com

Liisi Laineste
Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia
liisi@folklore.ee

Abstract

The editorial article for the special issue of EJHR "Laughter and Humour in Communication" provides an overview of all the presented articles and highlights the general idea of the issue.

Keywords: communication, Gelological Congress, humour, laughter

The special issue of EJHR entitled "Laughter and Humour in Communication" was conceived during the conference in St Petersburg, Russia, in spring 2019. The central topic, formulated at first in a rather abstract way, quickly acquired a specific direction which went further beyond communicative practices. Almost all of the authors included here make a reference to the origins of humour and laughter in culture, which gives the issue a historical-cultural slant. Instead of seeing humour primarily as a communicative tool with a focus on its functional perspective, humour in the published articles appears as an independent phenomenon that has a formational, organising and uniting function for other cultural practices.

It is hard to say how the authors, all representing varied disciplines, have agreed on such a common denominator. One reason probably is the specific Slavic cultural and academic

tradition to which most of them belong, as almost all speak Russian as their first language. Indeed, Russian secondary education is more oriented to humanities and social sciences. Knowing the history of literature and culture is elementary in Russia, and that is why mathematicians, physicists or biologists are all well-versed in culture (by the way it is rarely vice versa). This is a cultural tradition.

Another reason for the mentioned unity of the authors may be the fact that almost all of the work published here was prepared for the 5th Gelological Congress, which took place in St Petersburg, Russia on 29 May – 1 June 2019 (see review in Gluhova et al. 2021). Since 2011, Russian humour scholars representing mostly disciplines in the humanities began to cooperate, first inside the country, and soon with foreign colleagues, focusing on the topic of humour and laughter. Their discussions have so far expanded and developed, but maintained some shared focal points, which can also be seen in this special issue.

It would seem that the authors who worked on the texts independently of each other, using different data in their studies as well as different methods, would come up with completely different studies with varied accents and research frameworks, but in fact, strangely, the articles written by philosophers, psychologists, linguists, philologists, folklorists and cultural scientists form one meaningful whole. The editors only needed to find a coherent structure for the volume, assuming that the reader needs to see the unfolding connections between the theoretical and the practical, the universal and the particular, the past and the present. Following this logic, the articles are arranged to form two large blocks, which begin or end with the article that unites them into the block. The issue begins with the theoretical model of humour, proposed by Borodenko and Petrovskiy, and ends, as a final chord, with the work of Hietalahti, dedicated to the philosophy of modernity. The two parts can be divided into diachronic and synchronic approaches. The first one reflects the history of humorous practices from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece through biblical and Christian practices to medieval and modern ones. The second approach reflects on contemporary practices in parody, memes, urban life, psychiatry, language, and communication.

The article by **Marina Borodenko** and **Vadim Petrovskiy** presents a developed theoretical concept of the "counter-sign" model first proposed by Borodenko in 1995. In their semiological approach the authors define humour as a "sign-based identification of non-identifiable signs within the space of conventionality." Humour as a complex sign may be constructed through sign duality or ambiguous signs, both can be described in a unified way through the idea of a "counter-sign" (a dynamic sign, a destroyer of signs). In the counter-sign concept, the dual signifier within comedy is a shifting element associated with the signifieds which are opposite in meaning. Based on the "counter-sign" model of humour, the authors make a formal distinction between satire, humour, irony, and jokes. Such an interpretation of humour, which is not a dominant one for the authors of the issue, allows for explaining some processes of communication. Here, however, it is rather presented as polemical. The article by Borodenko and Petrovsky gives a good theoretical start for a possible interpretation of humorous practices in the history of culture.

The first of the cultural humorous practices presented in the issue is the practice of Ancient Egypt. An expert on the culture of Ancient Egypt, **Andrey Murashko**, shows in his research how the Egyptians, being very religious, at the same time did not refuse to joke about the gods or the cult. The category of the sacred, often opposed in the research to the profane, in practice, in this case, in ancient Egyptian practice, does not reveal such a confrontation. Parody of religious practices, as O. Freidenberg (2006) claimed, does not deny, but asserts the very belief in god(s). Referring to the theory of carnival by Bakhtin (2009 / 1968), the author of the article demonstrates the ambivalent nature of humour in the culture of the Middle and New Kingdoms. At the same time, the article raises the problem of the origin of this humour. The humorous

interpretation of the gods does not always find its source in folklore, in popular culture; on the contrary, the reliable sources are often the result of the work of very educated Egyptian authors.

The following three articles written by Kurdybailo, Prikhodko, and Shcherbakov focus on the opposition of the laughable and the serious and aim to reveal how the heroic or sacred can be perceived as ridiculous.

Dmitry Kurdybaylo's article deals with the presence of humour in the Bible. Focusing his attention on the episode with Jonah and the gourd (Jonah 4:6-11), the author traces its perception in different periods of Christian exegesis practice. For the modern reader, this episode can sound amusing. The article tries to find out whether the late antique and Byzantine eras commentators viewed this episode in a similar way. Applying the latest achievements of humour studies, the author relies on elements of incongruity and superiority theories, as they allow highlighting potentially humorous elements in a text that has been separated from modernity by more than a millennium. The original biblical text in which Jonah, awaiting the Nineveh's destruction, witnesses the death of the gourd, undoubtedly contains, in addition to moral allegory, hyperbole and grotesque. In the period of late antiquity, commentators of this text emphasise the moral aspect of the situation presented in this episode. Origen of Alexandria turned to this part of the Bible to refute its mocking interpretation written by pagan philosopher Celsum and to make Jonah's story sound serious. Ephrem the Syrian incorporated his interpretation into his sermon and to make the speech more inspiring he enhanced the effect of contrast of Jonah's story. In modern interpretations, this contrast structure of the narrative can become the reason for its humorous perception. In a later period, Byzantine interpreters brought out the paradoxical nature in this biblical episode. John Chrysostom's version emphasises the apologising and justifying tone in which God addresses Jonah as he did not keep his promise and deceived Jonah's expectations, thus making the situation ambiguous. Cyril of Alexandria found in this story the "immature child (Jonah) – wise father (God)" psychological pattern. The theme of infancy naturally gives rise to the theme of the game, and the ludic elements, in turn, can lead to a humorous interpretation of this episode. Maximus the Confessor's interpretation is based on the assumption that God can resort to deception while swindling the devil. Following humour studies methodology, it can be said that the commentator exploits the trick of deceiving readers' expectations in this case. What unites the antique and Byzantine comments of Jonah's story is their author's pursuit to transfer the biblical text from the comic to a serious type of discourse.

Maksim Prikhodko's article examines the use of irony in the polemic waged by Origen, a Christian theologian and exegete, against Celsum, who was a derisive critic of Christianity. Celsum proceeds from a pagan notion of heroism and ironically points to candidates for deification both among the characters of ancient Greek mythology and history and among biblical characters who would be much more suitable for this than Christ. For example, he calls such a character Jonah from the same episode that was considered in Kurdybailo's article. Origen uses the same ironic mood as his opponent, but if Celsum in his reasoning goes from serious assessments of Greek characters to sarcastic ones when he speaks of the biblical personages, Origen, on the contrary, finds comic features in the Greeks and heroic traits in the biblical characters. At the same time, Origen concludes that it is inadmissible to apply worldly irony to biblical prophets such as Jonah and Daniel.

The article by **Fedor Shcherbakov** examines the relationship between the comic and the sacred. On the one hand, there are examples of laughing gods in Homer's Iliad. On the other hand, religious consciousness should not allow a comic interpretation of the divine; the sacred requires a serious attitude to itself. Reviewing the main approaches to the phenomenon of laughter from Aristotle to Bakhtin, the author points out the incompatibility of the comic and theological discourses. Ancient Greek thinkers solved this incompatibility in two ways. Firstly, the dubious and indecent actions of the gods, exposing them to ridicule, are allegories that require additional interpretation to remove ambiguity and indecency and to reveal their deep

serious philosophical meaning. In this case, the real serious hidden meaning completely destroys humour. The second way of interpretation presupposes not destruction, but a reconciliation of the serious and the comic through the symbolic reading of the classic poem. This symbolic reading implies the simultaneous representation of not just two, as in the case of allegory, but an unlimited set of meanings in the text; and among them there may be the meanings that can provoke laughter.

By analysing the interpretations of biblical and ancient Greek texts, these three articles demonstrate how humour interacts with seriousness, and how humour latently penetrates even the spheres that seem to be rejecting laughter and amusement.

Quite a natural continuation here is the study of **Maria Semikolennykh** on the rhetorical practices of medieval scribes, who used humorous techniques as ways to convince readers that their interpretation is the correct one. We are talking about the figure of Plato and the translations of his works into Latin, the content and emphasis in which depended on the translator's attitude to the authority of Plato. In particular, the article deals with the correspondence dispute about Plato between George of Trebizond and Basilios Bessarion, which is reflected in the fifth book of the latter "In Calumniatorem Platonis". The researcher carefully examines how this medieval scribe skilfully uses irony and sarcasm to discredit his opponent, George of Trebizond, to expose him in a comic light, with the ultimate goal of discrediting his translation and interpretation of Plato's philosophy. Thus, humorous rhetorical techniques become important tools for asserting the philosophical position of the one who uses them. It is interesting how accurately and aptly Basilios Bessarion uses humour as a weapon.

The article by **Sergey Troitskiy** serves as a transition from medieval issues to modern subjects, as well as from the historical and cultural block to the topical and contemporary one. The author analyses the music video parody of the Ulyanovsk cadets of 2018. He shows how the interpretation of this essentially neutral work is embedded in the modern Russian cultural, political and media context. The analysis of the video leads the author to contend that parody reflects a trend of modern Russia which may be called *neomedievalism*. This is relevant both for the deliberate reference to medieval models and setups, and for the implicit copying of one's own ideas about the Middle Ages. Strange as it may seem, parody of the Middle Ages is most fully studied by Russian scholars. The author's question about whether parody itself is dangerous for the existing political and cultural order is solved in the article by referring to examples from medieval (and not only) humorous practices and their analysis by Bakhtin (1984), Freidenberg (2006), Tynyanov (1977), the coryphaei of the first half of the 20th century, who created the classical theory of parody through an appeal to historical and cultural material. Involving a broad context, the author manages to answer his question about the danger of parody for the world order similarly to Murashko's problem about Ancient Egypt, i.e. negatively: parody does not threaten the order until the order itself begins to degrade and collapse, which means that the fears of politicians and journalists about the parody of the Ulyanovsk cadets are also groundless.

The study co-authored by **Daniil Rivin** and **Olga Shcherbakova** continues the investigation of modern humour practices. The authors aim to examine the connection between the levels of *gelotophobia* (the fear of being laughed at), *gelotophilia* (the joy to be laughed at), and *katagelasticism* (the joy to laugh at others), on the one hand, and understanding the humour in Internet memes on the other. The participants filled in the PhoPhiKat<30> questionnaire, and after that, were interviewed about a set of Internet memes. Although no correlation was established between levels of gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism and general understanding of the Internet memes, the study indicates a promising avenue to link the psychological approach to humour with meme studies and folklore. Memes have been called "(post)modern folklore" (Shifman 2013: 15) and they appear as the pivotal phenomenon in shared online culture. They are prone to cast light onto the workings of the (collective) human

mind. Connecting this to how the individual mind works and perceives humour can explain the processes of humour spread, perception and appreciation in the contemporary information field. One can hypothesise that the people who demonstrate higher metacognitive reflection have a closer connection to the collective meme pool and the meanings the memes convey. The results of this study point out that the preference for a certain type of humour is not determined by the attitudes to humour in general, but rather by the ability to reflect on the meaning of certain instances of humour and connect these to a wider social reality.

In her novel anthropological approach, **Daria Vasileva** summarises a pilot project that aims to describe the functions and meanings of laughter in city space. Urban spaces have brought along changes in what the author calls "sonic imagination" – a complex conglomeration of common everyday sound-related perceptions and practices in real interactions and the media. As the perception of laughter can be inherently ambiguous, its positive and negative sides – or, as the author puts it, the creative and destructive potential of laughter and humour – need equal attention. Laughter has been equally present in the past and the present soundscapes, but the present-day context of cultural superdiversity has necessitated the reflection of how we use laughter in public spaces so that it fosters, and does not destroy, connectedness and communication. Throughout the article, subtle connections to the latest cutting edge research to other disciplines, e.g., that of psychology and more particularly of gelotophobia (Titze 2009; Ruch et al. 2014; Volovik et al. 2021) arise. Vasileva's anthropological approach allows a fresh look at this but also other laughter-related phenomena. Eventually, as the author states, how we use laughter, what we hear and how we react when someone laughs can help us understand the key processes taking place in the urban space today.

The article by **Denis Shunenkov, Viktoria Vorontsova,** and **Alyona Ivanova** regards the role of the fear of being laughed at in people with mental disorders. The authors for the first time examine the relationship between gelotophobia, attitudes to illness, and self-stigmatisation in patients with minor, non-psychotic mental disorders, as well as those with brain injuries, who also had mild mental disorders, without having the status of psychiatric patients. Patients displaying high levels of gelotophobia were in general characterised by disadvantageous attitudes to illness. In the group of psychiatric patients, gelotophobia was associated with self-stigmatisation, whereas in the group of neurological patients it was not. Thus, the authors suggested different mechanisms of gelotophobia development for each of the two groups. In general, the article confirms the importance of humour and laughter practices for people with mental disorders.

Jarno Hietalahti seeks answers to the humour-related self-reflexiveness of artificial intelligence (AI) from a philosophical perspective. What does it mean if and when AI should possess a sense of humour? There are already practical uses for such robots, e.g. in elderly care homes where intelligent machines could act as companions and caregivers for the infirm. However, certain preconditions need to be fulfilled – be it a human being or a machine – in order to be able to say that sense of humour is present, and Hietalahti in his thought-provoking article aims to pin these requirements down. Whether these preconditions can actually be met, will be something AI designers need to tackle in the future. For example, having a sense of humour implies understanding and adhering to the worldview and social rules of a group where one belongs, thus the same should apply to robots. But can robots have a worldview? Hietalahti concludes that giving AI a sense of humour is a very difficult task because not just one, but five tough philosophical preconditions must be met in the result: worldview, self-consciousness, self-reflection, self-criticism, and losing control. Some of these might be programmable, even if only theoretically, in the current state of art in computer studies. At the same time, some others – like losing control and going against its programming – are much more challenging to achieve. Humour, after all, expresses the existential situation of a human being, and not that of a machine. An important part of expressing humour is being able to laugh at one's own faults, and in order

for machines to not just imitate joking and laughing, but actually show a sense of humour, this has to be eventually integrated in programming.

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