

THE ESTONIAN AND UKRAINIAN CONFERENCE ON THE NATURE OF LAUGHTER



Viktor Levchenko in Tartu.
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Between May 18th and 21st 2023, the Odesa Humanities Tradition Society and Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University staged the 15th international scientific and theoretical conference, titled *Laughter and Its Features: On the Nature of Laughter*, the latest in the series of biennial conferences that began in 2000 by. In 2023, due to the Russia–Ukraine war, the conference was held in Tartu, Estonia, through co-operation between the Estonian Literary Museum, the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies via the European Regional Development Fund, the Estonian Humour Museum, Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University, the Odesa Humanities Tradition Organisation, and the Centre for Humanities Education at the National Academy of Sciences, Ukraine.

The following events were part of the conference:

1. The opening ceremony with speeches by **Piret Voolaid** (Director of Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia), **Viktor Levchenko** (Odesa I. I. Mechnikov University, Ukraine), and **Oleksandr Kyrylyuk** (Centre for Humanities Education at the National Academy of Sciences, Ukraine).
2. Panel reports (more details below).
3. Roundtable discussions on Irony and Protest (chairman: **Sergey Troitskiy**), Estonian Humour and its Features (chairman: **Liisi Laineste**), and the Psychology of Humour for Existential Crises (chairman: **Inga Ignatieva**).

4. A musical performance from the children's choir of the Tartu Alexander Pushkin School, held at the Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia.
5. A visit to the Eesti Vabariik 100 caricature exhibition at the Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia.
6. A visit to the Nii see algas! caricature exhibition with caricatures by Urmas Nemvalts and Priil Koppel, at the Estonian Humour Museum, Rapla, Estonia.

During the conference, thirty reports were presented by scientists and scholars from Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. The reports presented at the conference had a variety of objectives, and the speakers used a variety of methodologies and research data. However, the reports can be grouped by theme, with the proviso that some papers were at the intersection of several themes.

The largest thematic group was one that could be tentatively called humour studies (or gelotology). This group deals with issues relating to the essence, origin, nature, and mechanisms of humour, and the problems of conceptions of humour. **Toomas Tiivel** (ELUS, the Estonian Naturalists Society, Estonia), as part of his report *On the Origin of Humour*, considered humour to be a universal human behavioural pattern developed during evolution. Tiivel studies laughter as a form of possible expression of cooperation and symbiosis. It is a signal that provides information about the empathy, mental state, and sympathies of the person who is laughing. The universality of laughter as a human signal and the ability to produce and experience humour make it universal to all human cultures.

In their talk, entitled *Funny Situations and Features of their Implementation* **Olexander Mikhailyuk** (Ukrainian State University of Science and Technology, Ukraine) and **Viktoriiia Vershyna** (Oles Honchar Dnipro National University, Ukraine) examine the role of funny situations in inducing laughter. They argue that funny situations often arise from a violation of established rules of signification, disagreements of meaning, or clashes between meaning and nonsense, and are a result of interpretation. It is the interpretation that makes a particular situation funny. The interpretation is dependent on the interpreter's subjective perspective on the situation.

There were several reports on linguistic aspects of humour in this thematic group. In his report titled *Cringe Overhang: The Perlocutionary Effects of Cringe Comedy* **Alexander Sparrow** (Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) examines the “cringe overhang” effect induced by cringe comedies. Sparrow utilises John L. Austin’s speech act theory to elucidate why cringe comedy elicits a “cringe overhang” in some viewers and a laughter or stress response in others.

Władysław Chłopicki (Jagiellonian University, Poland) provided a review of classic and recent studies of figurative language and humour in his report *Humor and Figurative Language*. The review covered Viktor Raskin’s early work from metaphor to interdisciplinary contributions to the field of cognitive linguistics. The review attempted to go beyond the blurred boundary between the stylistic and conceptual dimensions of humorous expression, i.e., between “figures of language” and “figures of meaning”.

Michela Bariselli (University of Reading and University of Southampton, United Kingdom) attempted to strengthen the appeal of incongruity theory in her report, titled *Incongruity, Derision, and Disdain*. Using Roger Scruton’s conception, she showed how the theory can account for derision without relying on feelings of superiority, instead appealing to derision as involving a form of devaluing in connection with incongruity.

In his report *What Cognitive Humour Processing Can Tell Us about How Logic Works* **Kostiantyn Raikhert** (Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University, Ukraine) discussed the relationship between cognitive humour processing and the workings of logic. He explored the concept of the ‘logical mechanism’ within humour theories, framing humour processing as a form of inference. Raikhert referenced the work of C. Y. Chang, Y. C. Chan, and H. C. Chen, who characterise the structure of jokes as involving an expectation in the setup, followed by an incongruity with the punchline, leading to a resolution and the pleasure derived from the joke. Raikhert extended this idea by suggesting that if the setup is treated as a premise, it establishes an expectation through an inferred conclusion.

This thematic group also included reports on the philosophy of humour. In her report *The Phenomenon of Laughter in Olexandr Kyrylyuk’s Philosophy of Culture* **Inna Golubovych** (Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University, Ukraine) surveyed the Ukrainian philosopher Oleksandr Kyrylyuk’s idea. Kyrylyuk studies particular invariant structures of universal type, which he referred

to as categories of ultimate foundation. These categories include birth, life, death, and immortality. Humour is related to each of these categories and can be represented by the corresponding worldview codes, which are alimentary, erotic, aggressive, and informational.

Through Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology, **Liana Krishevsk**a (Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, Germany) analysed the existential dimension of laughter. In her report *Laughter in the Face of Death: The Existential Dimension* she described laughter in the face of death, comparing it to angst, which determines the structural integrity of Dasein in Heidegger's philosophy.

Olena Kolesnyk and **Maryna Stoliar** (T. H. Shevchenko National University Chernihiv Collegium, Ukraine) presented a report entitled *Philosophy of Laughter: The Main Paradigms*. The authors analysed the metamodern approach to laughter as a spectrum of various practices and reflections, revealing the heterogeneous understanding of the laughter as a phenomenon in Kant's legacy.

A few other thematic groups can be identified as well, such as [Country name] and Humour. "Country name" in square brackets here refers to either Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Russia or the Soviet Union. The Ukraine and Humour thematic group was represented by reports from Andrey Makarychev (Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, Estonia), Olena Pavlova and Maria Rohozha (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine), Anastasiia Stepanenko (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine), Vladimir Weingort (Kardis, a company of consultants from Estonia), Kateryna Yermieieva (Ukrainian State University of Railway Transport, Ukraine), and Olena Zolotarova (Interregional Academy of Personnel Management (IAPM), Ukraine).

In his report, titled *From Comedian to War-time Leader: Volodymyr Zelensky' between Popular Biopolitics and Practical Geopolitics* **Andrey Makarychev** discussed the contribution of the sitcom "The Servant of the People" to the emergence of Vladimir Zelensky as a political figure. **Olena Pavlova** and **Maria Rohozha** considered war memes as a form of cultural confrontation and resistance for Ukrainians in the Russia–Ukraine war in their report *Cultural Studies Approaches to the Study of War Memes in Ukraine*. In her report *War Humour in Ukraine and the Blurring of the Boundary between the Serious and the Unserious in 2022–2023* **Kateryna Yermieieva** argued that the model

of interaction between official and unofficial culture, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, is not applicable in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war.

The three reports above all related to the Russia–Ukraine war in some manner. The following three reports were not concerned with the war. **Anastasiia Stepanenko** talked about how internet memes can be used to examine the cultural landscape of Kyiv in her report *The Intersection of Social Media and Urban Culture: Kyiv’s Internet Memes*. **Vladimir Weingort** analysed Ukrainian folk laughter culture using examples of folk pottery ceramic figurines from the village of Oposhnya, and the poem “The Aeneid” by Ivan Kotliarevsky, in his report *From the Terrible to the Ridiculous: ‘Decline’ in Ukrainian Folk Crafts*. **Olena Zolotarova** reported on the Odesa Festival *Humorina As an Element of Ukrainian Culture*.

The Belarus and Humour thematic group featured two reports. In his *Laughter during the Plague* **Pavel Barkouski** (The Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland) gave an analysis of a popular humorous Belarusian Telegram channel in the context of war, epidemics, migrant crises, and political repression in Belarus. **Anastasiya Fiadotava** (Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia/Jagiellonian University, Poland) conducted a case study on the use of humour to support Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the democratically elected leader of the Belarusian people. Her report is titled *Humorous Support, Serious Critique: A Politician’s Cup in the Belarusian Online Public Sphere*.

The Estonia and Humour thematic group also features two reports. **Guillem Castañar** (University of Helsinki, Finland) conducted a study of the attitudes of Russian speakers in Estonia towards humour production, consumption, and sharing (his report is titled *Current Trends in the Humour Practices of Russian-speakers in Estonia*). And **Andrus Tamm** (Eesti Huumorimuseum/Estonian Humour Museum, Estonia) demonstrated that humour based on post-Soviet values is regressing due to financial constraints. His report, titled *The Evolution of Humour in Estonia in the Post-Soviet Era, 1992–2023*, highlighted this trend.

The Russia and Humour thematic group is presented by two reports. **Anna Krasnikova** (Università Cattolica di Milano, Italy) presented a report entitled *The End of a Beautiful Monstration: On One Carnival Procession and Language Defense in Russia*, discussing *Monstration*, a carnival manifestation that first took place in Novosibirsk in 2004 and has since become a significant social and cultural event in 21st century Russia. **Sergey Troitskiy** (Estonian Literary

Museum, Estonia) presented a report titled Humour and Protest. The report analysed humour as a tool for protest, specifically in Russian culture during the 2010s and early 2020s.

The study presented in **Maarja Lõhmus'** report, titled The Role of Soviet Humour stands out. Lõhmus (EAAS/Estonian Academic Society of Journalism, Estonia) investigated the role of humour in the Soviet Union in different periods (1940s–1950s; 1960s–1970s; 1980s).

Another thematic group could be called Literature and Humour. **Bartłomiej Brażkiewicz** (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland) presented a report entitled Humour As a Narrative Tool in Sergei Arno's Prose, which contained an analysis of the literary techniques of the Russian writer Sergei Arno. Independent researcher **Alexander Lavrentiev** presented a report entitled A Satirical Depiction of the Post-information Society in Gary Shteyngart's Novel *Super Sad True Love Story*. Lavrentiev analysed the absurd dystopia depicted in the novel and showed that, in the world of the absurd, sometimes the only means to rehabilitate common sense and authentic feeling is humour.

In his report, entitled Parody and Ancient Satire: Plato's "Symposium" and Petronius' Trimalchio's dinner, **Viktor Levchenko** (Odesa I. I. Mechnikov University, Ukraine) drew a comparison between Plato's "Symposium" dialogue and chapters 26-78 of Gaius Petronius' *Satyricon*, known as Trimalchio's dinner. *Satyricon* is a good example of Menippean satire, known for its parodies and literary allusions. Levchenko showed references in Trimalchio's dinner to Plato's "Symposium".

Another thematic group was Culture and Humour. In this group we include reports by Liisi Laineste (Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia), Viktor Levchenko (Odesa I. I. Mechnikov University, Ukraine), Alevtina Solovyeva (University of Tartu, Estonia) and Anastasiya Fiadotava (Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia/Jagiellonian University, Poland). **Liisi Laineste's** report, titled The Grass Is Greener in TikTok: Dance Videos as Expressions of Humorous Creativity offered an account of a recent TikTok dance fad, the green green grass dance, with a particular focus on humorous renditions of the dance. **Viktor Levchenko** presented a report titled The Museumification of Humour, on practices of transformation of humour artifacts into objects in museum exhibitions. **Alevtina Solovyeva** and **Anastasiya Fiadotava**, in their report entitled Boiled Shoe, Enamoured Cow and Buddha in a Fur: Buddhist Humour in Mongolian Communities examined some cases of Buddhist humour in the

Mongolian cultural environment. These cases are taken from folklore that deals with the relationships between Buddhist monks and ordinary people.

Separately, **Stanislav Govorov** and **Alyona Ivanova's** report entitled *Suicide Humour As a Form of Dark Humour: Clinical and Psychological Aspects* was worth noting. Independent researcher Govorov, and Ivanova from the International Society for Humour Studies (ISHS), pointed out that suicide humour is an instrument for reflection on the taboo against suicide, and that this humour can help in understanding what suicide is.

The contributions to the conference are planned to be published in the journal *Δοκσα/Δόξα*.

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