

Relationships of punchlineless (and in general older) "Schwanks" and contemporary punchlined jokes ("Witzes")

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There are two salient categories (distinct data sets) of Western jokeloric narratives:

- contemporary, necessarily punchlined jokes circulating in the oral tradition, printed sources and on the Internet;
- traditional non-punchlined Schwanks the most classical part of which constitute plots belonging to the number interval 1200–1999 of ATU (Aarne-Thompson-Uther) registers of folktales.

Contemporary humour theorists have largely addressed punchlined jokes and almost totally neglected non-punchlined "ATU Schwanks", Elliot Oring being one of the few exceptions.

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The "axiological stance" of ATU folk tales:

- There is a certain "motivating power" that determines the kind of conflict, course of events and final resolution of the plot.
- The principal characters of the tale embody a certain axiologically marked feature, due to which they will be punished or rewarded in the final resolution of the story.

Accordingly to the nature of these two constituents, the subgenres of AT-tales can be divided to two generic classes:

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1. The class that includes tales of magic and religious tales where the motivating force is of a supernatural kind, and 'good' means some moral virtue, thanks to which the character earns supernatural advisers and helpers and enjoys victory in the end.

2. The class that includes the bulk of animal tales, romantic or realistic tales (Novelle), all tales of the stupid ogre, and the main subcategories of Schwanks. The course of events and the final result is caused by natural factors and reasons. The axiological distinctior is of intellectual type, the 'good' meaning reason, cleverness, wit, craftiness, skill to successfully lie and deceive, etc., and the 'bad' stupidity, dumbness, dullness, simple-mindedness, etc.

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The main compositional types of non-punchlined "ATU Schwanks" are:

1) tales about clever acts, deception, skilled theft, witty repartees etc. – ca 400 (40% of ATU Schwanks);

2) tales about numskulls and another fools and stupid acts – ca 270 (27%);

3) those Thompson calls "Tales of Lying" and Uther calls "Tall Tales" – ca 90 (9%);

4) tales of lucky accidents – ca 30 (3%).

The four kinds constitute about 4/5 of the plots of Schwanks in Uther's register.

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The distinctive features between *Schwank* and *Witz* (joke) set forth by German folklorists (Hermann Bausinger, Siegfried Neumann, Lutz Röhrich, Norbert Neumann) are:

- a Schwank is on average longer than a joke;
- the world of the Schwank is normal, typical and rational, whereas the world of the joke is abnormal, bizarre and nonsensical;
- Schwanks tend to be explicitly didactic, whereas jokes avoid overt moralization;
- jokes tend to be told in the present tense, Schwanks in the past;
- Schwanks "live" by deeds and events, jokes by possibilities offered by language and speech;
- Schwanks are typically multiepisodic and end with a narrative resolution, whereas jokes typically consist of one single episode, and end abruptly with a punchline.

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Elliot Oring (*Jokes and Their Relations* (1992), p. 82) considers most of the listed differences to be relative, or concomitant, if not irrelevant, and asserts:

"The only distinction that seems critical in distinguishing the joke from the humorous tale is the presence or absence of what is colloquially referred to as a *punchline*. A joke without a punchline is not a joke. [- - -]

In other words, it is the punchline that conditions the other conspicuous features of the joke."

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Linguistic and other incongruity theories of humour in general (Arthur Koestler, Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo, and others) are exclusively oriented to punchlined jokes.

Presence of the punchline has the definitive power: where is no punchline, there is no joke, no funniness.

So the ATU Schwanks should likely fall altogether outside the scope of humour, and one could guess to what did punchlineless Schwanks owe their existence, popularity and longevity?

There are many other deficiencies in the current humour theories as well that impede the proper analysis of non-punchlined Schwanks.

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For example, in Salvatore Attardo's GTVH model there is a curious puzzle that concerns theoretical labelling of the characters of verbal (folk or other) humour and their axiological qualification.

The GTVH model defines only one type of joke characters – the TARGET, that is, the "object" or "butt" of the joke. Indeed, the punchline can often qualified as an unintentional self-exposure of the butt of the joke.

But not less often we meet both in Schwanks and punchlined jokes a pair of characters opposed to each other, communicating and fighting with each other, and in that case the "loser" can be punished by the clever "winning" antagonist either materially and/or physically, or via a witty retort.

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For example, two items of so-called trumping, or adversarial humour, quoted by Tony Veale et al.:

- Arthur Neville Chamberlain: I believe that Herr Hitler genuinely wants peace.
Winston Churchill: Yes, a piece of Poland, a piece of France, a piece of...
- Emperor Charles the Bald: What separates an Irishman from a fool?
Irish philosopher John Scotus: Just this table.

Here Chamberlain and Charles the Bald are obviously targets of verbal punches they get from Churchill and John Scotus, correspondingly. But how should one describe the role left for Churchill and Scotus themselves? In contemporary cognitive psychology and linguistics the word "target" is almost automatically paired and associated with the word "source". Are they then "sources" of humour, or if not, then what are they?

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Further, cleverness in jokes is not an unreservedly positive trait. As Christie Davies claims, in ethnic jokes cleverness of characters (prevalently Jews and Scots) is typically accompanied by stinginess, the output being an axiologically ambivalent condition that Davies calls "canny":

"The canny person has to have cleverness, but canniness also requires a crafty, calculating, thrifty, measuring disposition. Canniness implies cleverness and rationality, but it is a shrewd cleverness, and a calculating rationality applied in the pursuit of personal advantage..."

"The comically canny hero of ethnic jokes is represented as "too clever," "too clever by half," "too clever for his own good"..."

(Ethnic Humor Around the World (1990). p. 15)

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This takes us to the question of how sharp is the distinction between stupidity and cleverness, alias between positive and negative characters in jokes in general?

In the world's jokelore there is a whole plead of "wise fools", Hodja Nasreddin being perhaps the most salient of them.

Besides, there is a lot of jokes based on so-called "twisted logic", or "Jewish logic" where it is often hard to determine the axiological quality of the sayer.

The following item is allegedly one of Sigmund Freud's favourite jokes that he used to tell to illustrate the psychological mechanism of rationalisation:

A woman explains why she doesn't have to pay for her neighbours' tea pot. First, I never borrowed the pot. Second, when I borrowed it, it was already broken. Third, when I gave it back, it was in perfect condition.

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Archival and other source materials can suggest and support the hypothesis that the non-punchlined ATU Schwanks and punchlined jokes represent just two different historical strata in the development of the jokelore of many European nations (including Estonians).

Above-mentioned German folklorists have even attempted to corroborate that many of contemporary punchlined German Witzes are the direct typological descendants of their older non-punchlined Schwank ancestors.

And indeed, the existing folkloric source materials of European (particularly Northern-European) peoples quite clearly reveal that in the 19th century people likely preferred to tell (and collectors to record) non-punchlined Schwanks, whereas in the 20th century, in contrast, mainly punchlined jokes.

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Such a supposition could be implied from / supported by several likely weighty empirical circumstances, historical studies and theoretical postulates, for example:

- Perhaps the birth of the punchline as the "device of joke making" was just one of the epiphenomena of the alleged general disappearance of the cultural model of the Great Chain of Being in the last decades of the 18th century.
- Many tales of deception are very reminiscent of certain so-called practical jokes that are considered to belong to the ancient, primitive strata of the development of humour – see, for example, in Rapp's *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (1951).
- The punchlined joke cannot be retold to the same listener twice or more times, but the non-punchlined Schwank can.

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• Paul McGhee (*On the Cognitive Origins of Incongruity Humor: Fantasy Assimilation versus Reality Assimilation* (1972; 1979)) attempted to correlate the stages of development of humour with the ontogenetic stages of the human personality, observing children as a seedbed to corroborate the discovery that the feeling of cognitive (including humorous) enjoyment and satisfaction can be caused not only by the novelty of the stimulus, but also by the possibility to reduce the novel stimuli to repeatedly experienced and familiar schematic patterns of mind.

• Everything in the case seemed to correspond to Yuri Lotman's (*Лекции по структуральной поэтике* (1964), p. 172-183) postulate about the two historical strata of aesthetics – the earlier "aesthetics of sameness" ("эстетика тождества") and the modern "aesthetics of opposition" ("эстетика противопоставления").

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However, on some broader spatial and temporal scale, there are irrefutable facts that undermine these beliefs and constructions.

The most well-known of them is the notorious *Philogelos* (Laughter-Lover), the allegedly oldest manuscript of old Greek jokes that has survived to our days, a collection of 265 texts supposedly written in the 10th century of our era, but based on considerably older sources.

Philogelos displays a number of established ethnic, social and psychotypological butts (including the notorious *scholastikos*, translated into English as "pedant", "(absent-minded) professor", "egghead" etc., the Kymeans and Abderites, deals with topics of sexual behaviour, drunkards, etc.

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What is particularly remarkable, is that the texts of the *Philogelos* are just jokes – short items in the form of a dialogue or "reverted wellerism", evidently oriented to punchlined endings, although the punchlines can often feel somewhat strange and cryptic when read in contemporary translation.

They have nothing in common with the predominant narrative patterns of the ATU Schwanks of deception.

They very frequently involve stupidity, but parallels with the ATU types are few and far between and, as a rule, restricted to cases in which stupidity is demonstrated, but is not punished.

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Here are some examples from Michael Hendry's Internet anthology "IOCI ANTIQVI: ANCIENT JOKES" (<http://www.curculio.org/Ioci/>):

- A professor nearly drowned while swimming; he swore that he would not enter the water again, before first learning how to swim well.

ATU 1293. Philogelos no. 2

- Wishing to teach his donkey not to eat, a pedant did not offer him any food. When the donkey died of hunger, he said: "I've had a great loss. Just when he had learned not to eat, he died."

ATU 1682. Philogelos no. 9

- A man from Kyme was trying to sell some honey. When someone came and tasted it and said that it was very good, the seller said: "Well, yes: if a mouse hadn't fallen in it, I wouldn't be selling it!"

ATU 1578A*. Philogelos no. 173

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Some more examples from *Philogelos* without ATU parallels:

- An Abderite, seeing a eunuch conversing with a woman, asked him if she was his wife. When he answered that a eunuch could not have a wife, he replied "Then she must be your daughter."

Philogelos no. 115

- A Kymean doctor, operating on someone who was in terrible pain and crying out, switched to a blunter scalpel.

Philogelos no. 177

- Running into a poindexter, a friend said "I congratulate you on the birth of your son." To which he replied "Yes, thanks to all my friends!"

Philogelos no. 98

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But the most serious empirical argument that has totally confused me, vanished my faith in the strictly bivalent distinguishability between the punchlined and non-punchlined humorous narratives and completely demolished my hitherto perception of what the punchline "as such" is, and of the historical collation of punchlined and non-punchlined folk jokes, was the existence of the huge and extremely heterogeneous corpus of tales about Hodja Nasreddin that have been, and continue to be, very popular and productive in the very large area of the Oriental world.

Nasreddin totally destroyed my earlier perception of axiological rules governing humorous narratives, the very concepts of "good" and "bad" in humour, of relationships between the cleverness and stupidity, between the philosophical depth and seriousness and coarse vulgar clownade, between the intentional and the spontaneous in general, etc.

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Publications of Nasreddin tales – both on paper and on the Internet – are innumerable, but the number of credible academic sources is quite low.

In Uther's new register of folktale types the proportion of Nasreddin plots seems to be relatively high: it includes at least 126 references to Albert Wesselski's book *Der Hodscha Nasreddin* I–II (1911), that is, almost ¼ of all Uther's joke plots. But in Wesselski's book the percentage of materials originating from Southern Europe and other places outside Turkey and other "core areas" of such plots is quite high.

M. S. Kharitonov's collections *Twenty three Nasreddins* (1978) and *Twenty four Nasreddins* (1986), on the contrary, include only about 50 references to the older versions by Aarne, Thompson, Andreev, the register of Eastern Slavic peoples by Barag et al., that constitute only ab. 4% of the sum of Kharitonov's plots.

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Let us look at the following seven variants of Nasreddin plots that seem to reiterate quite frequently in various sources and, at the same time, are indexed in ATU registers and thus should belong, on the principle, to non-punchlined Schwanks, not punchlined jokes.

When reading these examples, please contemplate a little bit on some questions:

- 1) how "non-punchlined" do you really feel them?
- 2) how are stupidity and cleverness related in Hodja's behaviour in each of these stories ?
- 3) to what extent and sense is there possible to speak about the "real winner" or "real loser" of the conflict arising in each of the stories?

In Uther's system the first five stories belong to the category "The Clever Man", the sixth – to the category "Other Jokes about Religious Figures", and only the seventh – to the category "Stories about a Fool" (previously Thompson's "Numskull Stories").

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ATU 1594. The Donkey is Not at Home

One day, a friend of the Hodja came to him and asked if he could borrow his donkey for two hours to go to the town. The Hodja, not really wanting to lend his donkey, thought for a while and then said:

"Dear friend, I would like to help you but I have lent my donkey to another friend."

The man was turning to leave when he heard the donkey, who was in the stable, bray. The braying became louder and louder. Then the man turned to the Hodja with great anger and shouted:

"You, Hodja, you have cheated me!"

The Hodja, in turn, was very angry and shouted back: "You silly man, haven't you any sense, whom do you believe, me or the donkey."

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ATU 1558. Welcome to the Clothes

The Hodja was invited to a banquet. Not wanting to be pretentious, he wore his everyday clothes, only to discover that everyone ignored him, including the host. So he went back home and put on his fanciest coat, and then returned to the banquet. Now he was greeted cordially by everyone and invited to sit down and eat and drink.

When the soup was served to him he dunked the sleeve of his coat into the bowl and said, "Eat, my coat, eat!" The startled host asked the Hodja to explain his strange behaviour.

"When I arrived here wearing my other clothes," explained the Hodja, "no one offered me anything to eat or drink. But when I returned wearing this fine coat, I was immediately offered the best of everything, so I can only assume that it was the coat and not myself who was invited to your banquet."

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ATU 1592B. The Pot Has a Child and Dies

Nasreddin borrowed a pot from his friend. The next day, he gave the pot back to the friend, and also gave him another smaller pot. The friend looked at the small pot, and said, "What is that?" "Your pot gave birth while I had it," Nasreddin replied, "so I am giving you its child." The friend was glad to receive the bonus and didn't ask any more questions. A week later, Nasreddin borrowed the original pot from the friend. After a week passed, the friend asked Nasreddin to return it. "I cannot," Nasreddin said. "Why not?" the friend replied. "Well," Nasreddin answered, "I hate to be the bearer of bad news...but your pot has died." "What!" the friend asked with skepticism. "A pot cannot die!" "You believed it gave birth," Nasreddin said. "So why is it that you cannot believe it has died?"

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ATU 1624. Thief's Excuse: The Big Wind

Cogia Efendi one day went into a garden, pulled up some carrots and turnips and other kinds of vegetables, which he found, putting some into a sack and some into his bosom; suddenly the gardener coming up, laid hold of him, and said, "What are you seeking here?" The Cogia, being in great consternation, not finding any other reply, answered, "For some days past a great wind has been blowing, and that wind blew me hither." "But who pulled up these vegetables?" said the gardener. "As the wind blew very violently," replied the Cogia, "it cast me here and there, and whatever I laid hold of in the hope of saving myself remained in my hands." "Ah," said the gardener, "but who filled the sack with them?" "Well," said the Cogia, "that is the very question I was about to ask myself when you came up."

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ATU 1534E*. Good Decision
(usually connected with the character of Hershele in Jewish jokes)

Nasreddin Hodja was named the kadi of Aksehir. One day, two men with a dispute came to him and asked him to resolve their conflict. The Hodja listened to the plaintiff first. "You are right!" he said when the plaintiff completed his account. Then, the Hodja listened to the defendant. "You are right!" he said to the defendant as well. Everyone in the room was perplexed. One of the observers dared to protest. "Kadi effendi," he said, "You agreed with both of the parties. The dispute can't be settled if you say "you are right" to both of them." Nasreddin Hodja considered for a moment, then he said: "You are right too!"

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ATU 1826. The Clergyman Has No Need to Preach

Once, the people of The City invited Mulla Nasruddin to deliver a khutba. When he got on the minbar (pulpit), he found the audience was not very enthusiastic, so he asked "Do you know what I am going to say?" The audience replied "NO", so he announced "I have no desire to speak to people who don't even know what I will be talking about" and he left. The people felt embarrassed and called him back again the next day. This time when he asked the same question, the people replied "YES" So Mullah Nasruddin said, "Well, since you already know what I am going to say, I won't waste any more of your time" and he left. Now the people were really perplexed. They decided to try one more time and once again invited the Mullah to speak the following week. Once again he asked the same question - "Do you know what I am going to say?" Now the people were prepared and so half of them answered "YES" while the other half replied "NO". So Mullah Nasruddin said "The half who know what I am going to say, tell it to the other half" and he left!

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ATU 1334*. The Old Moon and the Stars

One day Nasreddin Hodja and a friend were admiring the sky and watching a new moon. Hodja Effendi," asked the friend, what do they do with the old moons?" – "They cut them, trim them and turn them into stars!"

And finally, the notorious tale about looking for the ring or keys:

One day Mullah Nasruddin lost his ring down in the basement of his house, where it was very dark. There being no chance of his finding it in that darkness, he went out on the street and started looking for it there.

Somebody passing by stopped and enquire: "What are you looking for, Mullah Nasruddin ? Have you lost something?"

– "Yes, I've lost my ring down in the basement." – "But Mullah Nasruddin , why don't you look for it down in the basement where you have lost it?" asked the man in surprise. "Don't be silly, man! How do you expect me to find anything in that darkness!"

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Idries Shah, the psychologist Robert Ornstein and others have tried to qualify Nasreddin as an outstanding Sufi poet and philosopher and extract from behind the surface of his seemingly foolish and absurd deeds and sayings some deep-reaching philosophical content.

In this spirit, the tale about looking for the ring or keys should admittedly be interpreted not just as a joke, but in deeper sufistic, spiritual manner, i.e. it allegedly suggests not to look for the eternal in temporal and earthly. The (dark) house symbolizes the internal (mental, spiritual) world of the human being and the space outside of it, respectively, surrounding us environment. The key for resolving many difficult problems should be looked for inside the dark hideouts of our soul and mind, not in the outer space. One must look for the God just where he had lost him etc.

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On the other hand, İlhan Başgöz (*A Thematic Analysis of Hoca Stories in Historical Perspective* (1998)) has collected and studied the oldest recordings of Nasreddin stories (in manuscripts of the sixteenth century) that should likely reveal the oldest layers and the most adequate "initial stance" of Nasreddin's character.

Başgöz argues that Nasreddin is, by and large, a antihero.

Nasreddin stories cast challenges to practically each component of Turkish political and social system of the time;

they problematise many fundamental aspects of human relationships and human knowledge;

they ridicule established and petrified rules and traditions and defy the authorities;

they express distrust towards the ways of social and individual functioning of human life and expose the folly of human characters.

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What is particularly noteworthy, according to Başgöz, the general mentality of these early tales appears to be astoundingly rude and obscene.

Hodja's attitude to religious matters is overtly blasphemous.

His family relationships are drastically upside down. No norms and models of social, moral and sexual behaviour are followed, all constraints and taboos break down. Primeval instincts run amok. The father's and mother's authority is nonexistent, all the communication between family members is violent and vulgar.

The coarse sexual and scatological terminology is used without any restrictions. Beside his wife, Hodja happens to have sexual intercourses with a whore, with a man, frequently with a donkey, by chance also with camel and cat.

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As a whole, the corpus of tales about Hodja Nasreddin turns out to be a huge mixture of everything that thoroughly demolishes and blends together any clearcut borders between the punchlined and non-punchlined humorous narratives, violates all axiological rules, all criteria for distinguishing "the good" and "the bad" that work very well for Schwanks and jokes of the "Western standard", between cleverness and stupidity, coarse obscenity and philosophical seriousness. All borders between the intentional and the spontaneous, between sincere speech and irony, between what happens "really" and what is played seem to be ruined.

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However, there is an empirical fact that can indicate another, perhaps more promising, aspect for structural division of humorous narratives.

It is the technical fact that in the book *Twenty Four Nasreddins* (1986) by M. S. Kharitonov, the best compendium of Nasreddin tales that I know, 83% of texts are ending with a phrase said by Nasreddin.

In the Turkish material of Albert Wesselski's book the share of such texts is even 94%; the frequencies are similar in other sources as well (e.g., those by G. Borrow, P. N. Boratav, and others).

Such ending comment can include a critical or approving evaluation of a situation, make a generalising conclusion from it, be a witty retort to a verbal attack of some other character, etc.

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So, the main structural watershed seems to go not between the non-punchlined Schwank as such and contemporary punchlined joke as such, but between the tales with a certain "real" or "material" solution of a certain problem and tales ending with somebody's comment, i.e. the direct speech.

This ending remark can be considered as one of the focal "points of dissemination" which, according to the configuration of conditions, can be qualified as an unintentional self-exposure of the butt of the joke, a witty retort of the clever antagonist, or just as a "sub-punchline" humorous comment of a neutral bystander (e.g., in wellerisms), axiologically ambivalent or totally asemantic saying of a "wise fool", a remark reminding the moral conclusion in the end of fables, etc. etc.

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