

Negotiating Reality with *Anekdoty*: Soviet vs. Post-Soviet Humor Lore

Daniela S. Hristova

1. Introduction¹

As a genre, *anekdoty* have been among the most popular oral narratives in the Soviet as well as post-Soviet era.² Similar to other folkloric and literary genres, the post-Soviet social and linguistic liberalization has had an impact on Russian humor lore, but to a much lesser degree than it might seem on the surface. Since effective humor narratives impart laughter by way of reacting to significant sociopolitical phenomena, the changed economic and ideological reality in post-Soviet Russia fostered paradigmatic classes of *anekdoty* that feature new protagonists. The question, however, is whether what made a Soviet *anekdot* funny differs from what makes a post-Soviet *anekdot* amusing. The answer to that question offers further insights into the social functions of humor as well as into the sociology of language.

In the present study, I offer a formal analysis of Soviet as compared to post-Soviet political, ethnic, and sexual *anekdoty*. First, I consider the typology of the highest ranked *anekdoty* on the popular website *anekdot.ru*, and the humor tendencies they exhibit. Whereas the fall of communism radically diminished the productivity and popularity of political and ethnic humor, sexual jokelore not only sustained its vibrancy, but also amplified its sharpness. At the same time, as

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² *Anekdoty* (plural of *anekdot*) is the Russian approximation of the English word "joke." Although the two terms share structural and generic characteristics, they show significant dissimilarities which justify the use of Russian term in works treating the Russian humor lore. I use the term "joke" when discussing the theoretical framework of humor or when applying the term in a broader international context. See Graham 2003 for more on the difference between "joke" and *anekdot*.

will be shown below, it is the sexual *anekdoty* that underwent the least significant changes in terms of the themes they feature. As before, motives of sexual abnormality, sexual prowess, sexual ignorance or inexperience, and various forms of forbidden sex continued to evoke laughter.

Second, I examine representative examples of the two periods, and delineate the differences between them in light of Attardo and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). The comparison reveals interesting patterns and mechanisms of conversion of Soviet into post-Soviet *anekdoty*, e.g., a single meta-joke, such as (13) below, transformed the familiar Vovochka cycle into a political cycle about Putin. Furthermore, the political *anekdoty* about Vovochka established a second-generation cycle centered on *explicit* intertextuality with the original cycle. Similar intertextuality distinguishes another prolific cycle, i.e., the cycle about the New Russians. Disagreeing with Draitser 1998, among others, that the *anekdoty* about New Russians highlight the Russians' strengthened sense of identity, I interpret them as ethnic, and compare them with the Soviet *anekdoty* about Georgians.³ I demonstrate that the script of stupidity, the principal parameter of all ethnic humor worldwide according to Davies 1982, underpins the Soviet ethnic as well as post-Soviet *anekdoty* about New Russians.

2. Theoretical Approach

Most research on Russian humor takes a sociological or psychological approach in the analysis of *anekdoty*. Existing linguistic studies superficially focus on the language characteristics of *anekdoty*-telling as a specific oral genre. In what follows, I present a formal linguistic approach informed by Attardo and Raskin's revised version of the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) (Attardo & Raskin 1991). The amended theory, called the General Theory of Verbal Humor, broadens the scope of the SSTH and, in addition to semantics, includes other linguistic areas, most notably textual linguistics, theory of narrativity, and pragmatics.

The main hypothesis of the SSTH holds that

- (1) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the [following] conditions are satisfied:
 - i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
 - ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (...). The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in this text (Raskin 1985:99)

³ Cf. the discussion in Draitser 2001 of the link between the New Russians cycle and the Soviet jokes about Georgians.

The notion of “script” is central to Raskin’s theory. Originally a psychological term, script has operated under different definitions in linguistics. Raskin defines script as a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker, representing the speaker’s knowledge of a small part of the world in terms of certain routines and standard ways of doing things. Raskin circumvents the vagueness of his definition by insisting that a script is immediately related to a lexical term and, at the simplest level, equivalent to the lexical meaning of the word, i.e., a script is a complex of information associated with a lexical item. According to Attardo, the lexical meaning of the word is the “lexamatic *handle*” that causes a script to be activated (Attardo 2001:53). For example, the lexical script for “doctor” contains information such as the subject (human, adult), activity, both in the past and in the present (studied medicine, receives patients), place, time (every day, immediately), physical contact; the word “doctor” is the lexamatic handle that activates the whole script. Raskin further notes that “every script is a graph with lexical nodes and semantic links between the nodes,” thus drawing attention to the importance of links that connect not only lexical nodes, but also sets of scripts to form the speaker’s semantic network (Raskin 1985:81).

In addition to scripts, Raskin’s theory contains another principal component, *combinatorial rules*. These rules combine all possible meanings of the words that compose the sentence. In the process, the rules discard the combinations that do not yield coherent readings and preserve those that do. Similar to the native speaker’s intrinsic competence, the combinatorial rules should be able to process ambiguous sentences by accounting for all different readings as well as paraphrases by giving them identical interpretations. In Raskin’s view, the final reading of a sentence licensed by the rules should coincide with the meaning assigned to it by the native speaker.

Similar to other linguistic generative theories, Raskin’s semantic theory of humor seeks to formulate “a set of conditions which are both necessary and sufficient” in order “to match the speaker’s intuitive judgments about the same entities” (Raskin 1985:57, 58). According to Raskin, the two conditions in (1) are both necessary and sufficient for a text to be funny. The text’s compatibility, fully or in part, with two different scripts which are opposite to each other is the requirement that could provide an answer to the question, “What semantic properties of the text make it funny?” (Raskin 1985:58). While the overlapping of the two scripts is not necessarily a cause for humor *per se*, the *necessary* condition in the set that calls for the scripts to be in a relationship of opposition guarantees the evaluation of a text as humorous.

The script oppositions are binary in nature and exist on different levels of abstraction. At the highest level, the basic opposition is between real and unreal situations and is instantiated in three classes of lower-level oppositions: actual vs. non-actual, normal vs. abnormal, and possible vs. impossible. According to Raskin, those basic oppositions are further concretized by more specific pairs. The most common among them are good/bad, life/death, money/no-money, obscene/non-obscene, and high/low stature. Raskin notes that there must exist a textual element that switches the reading of a text from one script to an alternative, opposite script; in *anekdoty*, the punch line functions as such a *script-switch* trigger.

A schematic analysis of the *anekdot* in (2) demonstrates how the Semantic Script Theory of Humor processes a humorous text.⁴

(2) В гардеробе театра:

- Вам бинокль?

- Нет, спасибо, у меня с оптическим (прицелом).⁵

A loose semantic paraphrase of the text in (2) reads as follows, “The person at the cloakroom of a theater asks a man who is about to see the show whether he needs opera glasses in order to see more clearly in the theater. The visitor declines the offer saying he will use his own telescopic sighting system on his gun. In the first step of the SSTH analysis, the lexematic handles of the following scripts are activated: В, ГАРДЕРОБ, ТЕАТР, ВЫ, БИНОКЛЬ, НЕТ, СПАСИБО, У, Я, С, ОПТИЧЕСКИЙ, ПРИЦЕЛ. The second step activates the combinatorial rules that combine the various scripts according to compatibility, i.e., the meanings of гардероб as a piece of furniture or a person’s wardrobe will be discarded on their incompatibility with the rest of the text. This same step of textual processing also triggers the possible inferences, i.e., the reader/listener infers that the final line is meant as an answer to the previous question. At the next step, the reader switches from an “opera glasses” script interpretation of the story to an alternative reading in order to account for the spectator’s answer. This will allow the activation of the competing script of “sniper rifle” in light of which the

⁴ See Raskin (1985:117-127) for a detailed analysis of the doctor’s wife *anekdot*.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all *anekdoty* featured in this work come from the anekdot.ru website. All translations into English are my own.

“In the cloakroom at the theater:

“Do you need opera glasses?”

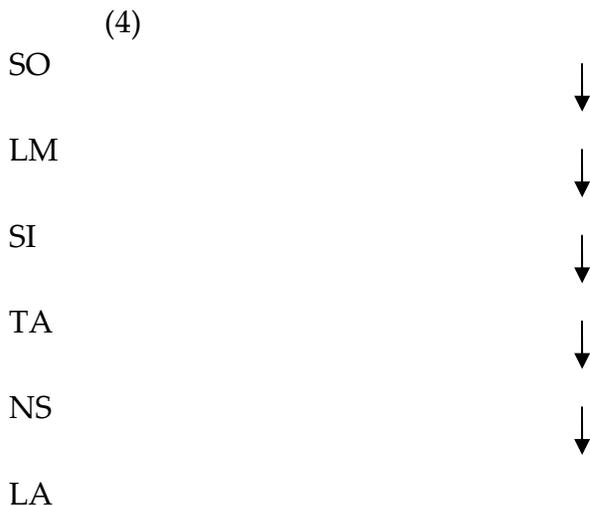
“No, thank you; mine comes with a telescopic sight on it.”

spectator's answer becomes meaningful, i.e., the rifle he has brought has a telescopic sight device on it. The text thus becomes partially compatible with two scripts ("glasses" vs. "sniper rifle") and the scripts are opposed on the violence/no violence basis. The compatibility of the text with two opposite scripts fulfills both requirements of the Semantic Script Theory of Humor as presented in (1) and consequently the text is evaluated as an *anekdot*.

The General Theory of Verbal Humor expands the scope of the SSTH as a semantic theory of humor to the level of "a linguistic theory *at large*" (Attardo 2001:22). In addition to the *script opposition* (SO) notion central to the SSTH, Attardo and Raskin (1991) enrich the GTVH with five other parameters called Knowledge Resources (KR), namely: Language (LA), Situation (SI), Narrative Strategy (NS), Target (TA), and Logical Mechanism (LM). Each parameter is instantiated with different values and the combination of the various values generates an *anekdot*. Hence, in the framework of the GTVH, each joke is a six-tuple, specifying the instantiation of each parameter:

(3) Joke: {LA, SI, NS, TA, SO, LM}

Although all six parameters must be present when a joke is generated, they are hierarchically ordered rather than equal:



Each parameter limits the options available for the instantiation of the parameters below it and is, in turn, limited in a similar way by the parameters above it. In the following paragraphs I briefly explain the six KRs; the terms and

their functions are further clarified in the discussion of the joke material in sections 3 and 4.

The Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism are the two most abstract parameters. The SO deals with the opposition overlapping required by the SSTH and therefore any humorous text will feature an SO. In comparison, the significance of the LM is far less certain and its status problematic. As defined in Attardo 2001, "The LM presupposes and embodies a 'local' logic, i.e., a distorted playful logic that does not necessarily hold outside of the world of the *anekdot*. Speakers are well aware of the limits of the local logic and 'go along with it' in the spirit of "willing suspension of disbelief"" (Attardo 2001:25).

The Knowledge Resource Situation is deemed the "props" of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. (Attardo 2001:244); this is what the *anekdot* is about. Since the activation of the relevant script determines the relevant props for the *anekdot*, the SI is not unique to humorous texts and, consequently, is of lesser interest to researchers. Similarly, the KR Narrative Strategy is tangential to humor research due to its taxonomic nature. The NS accounts for the type of narrative organization in which the *anekdot* is cast such as a simple narrative, a dialogue, a pseudo-riddle, or an aside in a conversation. The Armenian Radio *anekdoty*, for instance, provide a good example of the NS KR as a unifying parameter of an entire *anekdot* cycle.

The Target KR accounts for the "butt" of the joke. In addition to groups, group representatives, and stereotyped individuals, the TA KR could also include the so-called ideological targets, i.e., institutions such as marriage, romantic love, and "the establishment" which lack a clear constituency, but still maintain a connection with the individuals and/or identifiable groups and therefore may be ridiculed. Unlike all the parameters except LM, TA may be empty, i.e., *anekdoty* that do not aggressively target someone or something have an empty value for this parameter.

Attardo and Raskin define the Knowledge Resource Language as "all choices at the phonetic, phonological, morphophonemic, morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels of language" (1991:298). LA contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of the text and it is "responsible for the exact wording of the text and for the placement of the functional elements that constitute it (Attardo 1991:22). LA places the punch line, which is the center

of the *anekdot*, in final position and thus forces the reader to switch to a script that is opposite to the one that had been previously established.⁶

The analysis of the *anekdot* in (2) from the point of view of the General Theory of Verbal Humor provides the following values for the 6 KR's.

SO	opera glasses/sniper rifle; appropriate/inappropriate; normal/abnormal ⁷
LM	potency mappings
SI	theater production
TA	New Russian
NS	dialogue, question/answer
LA	associative conjunction

3. *Anekdot.ru* and the best *anekdoty* of 2007

Since the main objective of this study is to examine how the new *anekdot* scripts compare to those of Soviet times, it was important to ensure that the post-Soviet material is novel, or at least perceived as such by its consumers. In addition, the immense number of *anekdoty* flooding the book markets as well as cyberspace necessitated a selection criterion that could single out the representative tokens of the genre.⁸ The popular Russian website *anekdot.ru*, with its high visitor's traffic, various ratings of the "best" type, and multiple options for commentaries fulfilled my research requirements.⁹ In the rest of this section, I discuss the one hundred best new *anekdoty* for 2007, highlighting only those parameters and script oppositions that are unique to the post-Soviet humor lore.¹⁰

⁶ *Non-bona fide* (i.e. humorous) mode. According to Raskin (1985:100), *non-bona fide* communication differs from information-conveying, *bona-fide* communication by violating Grice's Cooperative Principle.

⁷ I use semi-colons to separate values that are alternative and commas for elaborations.

⁸ In a forthcoming article, I argue that the *anekdot* genre is undergoing an essential transformation: it is losing its special performance meanings (meanings that are discernable in situations of performance) and therefore shifting from oral to written genre.

⁹ Among the numerous websites publishing Russian *anekdoty*, *Anekdot.ru* is the largest humorous website on the Russian Internet; the site is also among the most often referred to by scholars studying Russian *anekdoty*. According to the site's founder and editor-in-chief Dima Werner, the site was established on November 8, 1995 and was the first to publish daily humorous materials, mainly *anekdoty*, so-called stories, *chastushki* (called *stishki*), and cartoons. Allegedly, more than 80,000 people visit the site daily, and the site has accumulated more than half a million texts.

¹⁰ All four categories have i) main edition, ii) the X of the day; iii) the best X of the past years; iv) the X of month; v) the basic rating of the year; and vi) other ratings. The rating is done

A taxonomical clarification is in order at this point. Raskin (1985) argues that there are only three main kinds of *aggressive* humor: sexual, ethnic, and political.¹¹ This taxonomy has proved helpful for contrastive-type studies, and I implement it in Section 4 of this article. Nonetheless, Raskin's criteria for categorizing a certain *anekdot* are vague. If one starts with the classification of the sexual and ethnic *anekdoty* in our database, for example, it is problematic to tag all remaining *anekdoty* as political. Consider (5), for instance:

- (5) Дочь учится на повара. Мать:
- А вам разрешают есть то, что вы приготовили?
Дочь (сквозь слезы):
- Нас заставляют.¹²

Raskin defines political humor very broadly and includes in the category comic situations that target "the life of entire societies under a political regime" (Raskin 1985:222). However, the script opposition in (5) is valid irrespective of a political leader, regime, or institution. Furthermore, (5) fulfills none of the criteria for ethnic or sexual humor. For the purposes of this study, I dub *anekdoty* similar to (5) *social* and discuss them as a separate political subgroup.

The set of ethnic *anekdoty* in the Best of 2007 List is surprisingly limited. The only ethnic groups targeted are Americans and Jews, whereas in Soviet times it was usually the Georgians, Ukrainians, or the Chukchis who evoked uneasiness among the Russians, and were therefore targeted in the ethnic humor lore.¹³ For instance, the *anekdot* called "Wisdom from American military manuals and other military sources," manipulates the ethnic script of stupidity in most of its thirty-seven separate jab lines, cf. (6):

on a -2 to +2 scale (the zero is included) with -2 being the lowest (*uzhasno*) and +2 the highest rating (*otlichno*). Ratings from all users are combined to give three different types of ratings: i) overall number of users who have rated an item, ii) overall score received by all participating voters, and iii) average rating (the average rating also includes the number of voters and the total score). Users can also supply comments to accompany their rating; the comment field is optional and often utilized. The rating of the best *anekdoty* of 2007 also includes the date of their publication and their submitter.

¹¹ Raskin believes that humor is, by nature, aggressive as it targets negative aspects of human life. However, one should note that the GVTH allows for an empty value of the TA KR, i.e., for jokes that do not ridicule a particular person or thing.

¹² A daughter is studying to become a cook. Her mother (asks), "Do they allow you to eat what you have made?" The daughter replies (in tears), "They force us to."

¹³ There is also a single punch line aimed at the Ukrainians in a political *anekdot*.

- (6) Бомбардировка с самолетов В-52 очень точна. Бомбы всегда гарантированно падают на землю.¹⁴

Jews, who have always been in the center of the Russian humor repertoire, continue to be common ethnic protagonists. Two *anekdoty* explore the “Rabinovich” prototypical cunning and the well-known Jewish humor script *query/answer*, e.g., “Еврейский SQL сервер отвечает запросом на запрос” (“The Jewish SQL server answers queries with queries”). One *anekdot* is a translation from Hebrew and therefore properly belongs to Jewish humor lore. Still, it deserves mention, since it is the only *anekdot* that uses epistle as a narrative strategy: first, the wife writes a letter to inform her husband that she is leaving him for his brother; then the husband replies with another letter to inform her that he just won the lottery and, by the way, his wife’s new lover and his brother used to be a woman. Thus the real script opposition *brother lover/sex change* is revealed in the *post scriptum* punch line of his letter: his brother Ariel used to be called Ariella.

At least thirty-two *anekdoty* focus on sexual, gender, or gender-related family issues. This relatively high number points to the fact that the proliferation of sexual *anekdoty* that began during *perestroika* continues to mark the daily Russian discourse, cf. Draitser 1999. The popular scripts and script oppositions of the past also carry over. Here we find the popular themes of a husband catching his wife with a lover, a professor’s involvement with his female students, genital size as a marker of masculinity, Vovochka’s sexual ignorance, rape as consensual intercourse, the anti-air defense army forces as the “designated” homosexuals, etc. Old scripts may engage new sexual nuances and thus achieve a richer humorous effect. The *anekdot* in (7), for example, explores the Soviet script of the female worker as subject to sexual exploitation. The masculine gender of the adjective *grustnyi* and the past tense form *byl*, however, unmistakably point to the fact that now the men also join in:

- (7) - Чего такой грустный?
 - У директора был.
 - Орал?
 - Анал...¹⁵

¹⁴ Attack from a B-52 bomber is always precise. The bombs are always guaranteed to hit the ground.

¹⁵ “Why are you so sad?”
 “I was at the director's office...”

Sexual scripts reflecting similar novel phenomena are ranked very high in the chart. For instance, the *anekdot* about two rich and sexy girls “picking up” a penniless engineer from Biriulevo at a bus station, spending an extravagant night with him and months later nostalgically remembering the event ranked as number one for almost ten months, only to move to second place in mid-December.¹⁶ Internet and other electronic devices as facilitators of erotic arrangements or sources of disgraceful embarrassment also receive their due attention.¹⁷

In addition to Target and Script Opposition, Language is the other Knowledge Resource that sets apart the 2007 sexual *anekdoty*. Given that the proliferation of *mat* in the last fifteen years might have diminished our sensitivity to foul language, it still holds true that the language of these sexual *anekdoty* ranks low on the vulgarity scale. The only two sexually foul lexemes one finds are *trakhat'sia* ‘to fuck’ (twice) and *gandon* ‘condom’, the latter as a reference to a person in otherwise non-sexual context. Compared to other *anekdoty* where one stumbles upon plenty of *pizdorvanets* ‘cunt-chaser,’ *pidaras* ‘queer, homosexual,’ etc., it is evident that the sexual *anekdoty* do not rely on the use of *mat* for humorous affect.

Similar to ethnic and sexual *anekdoty*, the “social” *anekdoty* (see above) present old script oppositions in a new light. The Soviet moral issues of drinking, reverence, and proper behavior, for example, now benefit from situation props that include modern computer gadgets, traffic jams, and trendy restaurants. Worthy of note in this group is an *anekdot* that uniquely superimposes the problem of global warming onto a typical Russian script. Opening with Pushkin’s lines from “Evgenii Onegin,” the *anekdot* first demonstrates how the old cultural chasm between the intelligentsia and peasantry, between the city and village, frequently used in the past to induce laughter, can finally be bridged. The script of stupidity is further developed in the punch line that reveals the ultimate outcome of the process:

- (8) Классические строки:
- Зима! Крестьянин, торжествуя,

“Did he yell at you?/Oral?” (The past tense form *oral* of the verb *orat* ‘to shout, to yell’ in Russian is homophonic with *oral* as in ‘oral sex.’)

“No, anal...”

¹⁶ See note 36, below.

¹⁷ Cf. (19), which I discuss in 4.2, below.

На дровнях обновляет путь...

Еще 100 лет назад всем все было понятно. Мой отец объяснял мне, что такое дровни. Я объясняю сыну, кто такой крестьянин. Похоже, мой сын будет объяснять своему, что такое зима.¹⁸

Jokes that denigrate political or administrative institutions and their representatives epitomize political humor. *Anekdoty* about members of the Duma, traffic police officers, army representatives or political figures such as Putin, Genadii Onishchenko, Medvedev, Lushkov, etc. constitute the bulk of the political *anekdoty* on *anekdot.ru*. A favorite prop for the KR SI is an encounter between a traffic policeman, the *gaishnik*, and a driver of a Bentley, Mercedes 600, or Lexus. As in Soviet times, the army officers represent a favorite target group; they are usually cowards and scoundrels lacking the courage to defend their honor precisely because they are cowards and scoundrels.¹⁹ In view of the then-approaching 2008 presidential elections, another preferred script concerned the alleged popularity of Putin's party "United Russia" and its predicted election victory. Of the three *anekdoty* featuring Putin personally, the one about him and Bush fishing together on the Volga river enhanced *Time* magazine's article about Putin as Person of the Year.²⁰

¹⁸ Those classic lines: "Winter! The peasant, enchanted, breaks a new trail with his sleigh..." Some hundred years ago everything in these lines was clear. My father explained to me what "sleigh" was. I will explain to my son what "peasant" is. Similarly, my son will explain to his own son what "winter" is.

¹⁹ "Поручик, вы трус и подлец. Я вызываю вас на дуэль!"

"Я не приду."

"Почему?"

"Потому что я трус и подлец."

"Lieutenant, you are a coward and rascal. I challenge you to duel!"

"I will not come."

"Why not?"

"Because I am a coward and rascal."

²⁰ Путин и Буш в России на рыбалке. Закинули удочки, Путин сосредоточенно смотрит на поплавок. Буш шлепает себя то по щеке, то по лбу, то по шее, весь исчезался. Смотрит на Путина - тот спокойно следит за поплавком.

"Вольдемар, а почему фас нэ кусают?"

"Меня нельзя."

Putin and Bush are fishing on the Volga River. After half an hour Bush complains, "Vladimir, I'm getting bitten like crazy by mosquitoes, but I haven't seen a single one bothering

In addition to *denigrating* jokes, political humor also includes *exposure anekdoty*, *anekdoty* that reveal economic shortages or lack of political freedom and civil liberties. Similar to most Soviet *anekdoty*, some *anekdoty* in our database do not solely pursue humorous ends but overtly draw the reader's attention to the problematic issue at hand, cf. (9) and (10):

(9) В стране полное взаимопонимание: народу нахрен не нужна эта власть, власти нахрен не нужен этот народ.²¹

(10) Рабам давали еды и одежды ровно столько, сколько бы им хватило для того, чтобы они смогли продолжить работать. Ничего существенного, в принципах формирования зарплаты, с тех пор не изменилось.²²

The category of *exposure* political humor also includes narratives dealing with Russians' existence under the political regime of Putin. At least seven *anekdoty* engage scripts of every day life survival techniques, violence, business dealings, etc. I finish my overview of the *anekdot.ru*'s rank list with the best *anekdoty* of 2007. Note how (11) opposes the scripts of God's punishment and one's word of honor to bring forward the superimposed script of violence:

(11) "Ваш банк дает кредиты под честное слово?"
"Без проблем..."
"А если я не верну?"
"Вам будет стыдно перед Всевышним когда предстанете."
"Когда это еще будет..."
"Вот, если пятого не вернете, шестого предстанете."²³

you." Putin: "They know better than that." (This is the English version of the joke that appeared in *Time* magazine, December 4, 2007, cf.

http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/printout/0,29239,1690753_1690757_1690766,00.html)

²¹ "There is a mutual understanding in this country: the people don't need their shitty government, and the government doesn't need its shitty people."

²² "They used to give slaves only enough meals and clothes so that they could continue working. Essentially, nothing has changed in the principles of salary negotiation."

²³ "Does your bank give loans for my word of honor?"

"No problem..."

"And what if I don't return it?"

"Then you will be ashamed when you appear before the All Mighty."

"But that's far in the future, right?"

"If you don't return it on the fifth, on the sixth you will meet him."

4. From the ruble of totalitarianism to the post-*perestroika* bak: Soviet vs. Post-Soviet *anekdoty*²⁴

The discussion in the previous section has already outlined some of the features that characterize the latest post-Soviet *anekdoty*. In this section, I focus on concrete examples that best represent the Soviet and post-Soviet times. The main objective of the contrastive examination is to delineate the formal differences between representative samples of the periods in light of the GTVH.

4.1 Political *Anekdoty*

Soviet political *anekdoty* are remarkably simple in their structure, exhibiting a script opposition between what is expected from political leaders and institutions, and what they really represent. Consider (12), for example, with its wonderful articulation of the script opposition “good/bad”:

- (12) Ленин показал, как можно управлять. Сталин показал, как нельзя управлять. Хрущев показал, что всякий дурак может управлять. Брежнев показал, что не всякий дурак может управлять.²⁵

A large number of political *anekdoty* that emerged in the *perestroika* years share this sophisticated simplicity. However, the most noteworthy aspect of the post-Soviet political humor is the novel adaptation of the Vovochka *anekdoty* for political objectives.²⁶ As suggested by the meta-jokes in (14), (15) and (16), the fact of Putin’s presidency changed the status of the old Vovochka cycle for the duration of that presidency:

²⁴ I borrow the phrase “the ruble of totalitarianism” from Draitser 1998.

²⁵ Lenin showed us how to govern, Stalin showed us how not to govern, Khrushchev showed us that any fool can govern, and Brezhnev showed us that not every fool can govern.

²⁶ As suggested below (see fn 31), the Vovochka cycle was first transferred into the political domain during Lenin’s time. I am grateful to my second reviewer for supplying the early Soviet *anekdot* that establishes the connection between Vovochka, a diminutive of the short form of “Vladimir,” and Vladimir Lenin:

Сидит Вовочка на уроке грустный, к девочкам не пристаёт, мальчиков не бьёт, даже матом не ругается.

Марья Ивановна в ужасе спрашивает: “Вовочка, что случилось?”

- Брата Сашу повесили!

Vovochka is sad in class; he doesn’t tease the girls, he doesn’t beat the boys, and he even doesn’t curse.

Distressed, Maria Ivanovna asks: “Vovochka, what happened?”

“My brother Sasha has been hung.”

- (13) Первый указ президента РФ:
“Все старые анекдоты про Вовочку считать политическими”²⁷
- (14) После 2 марта анекдоты про Вовочку перестают считать политическими.²⁸
- (15) До марта 2008, все анекдоты про Вовочку считать политическими... После марта 2008 года - закрыть удаффком и считать вне закона все анекдоты про медведя.²⁹

Let us begin by looking at the Knowledge Resources of a typical non-political Vovochka *anekdot*, exemplified in (16):

- (16) Вовочка пишет учительнице: “Марь Иванна! Я Вас люблю!”
Учительница возмущена: “Я не люблю маленьких детей!”
Вовочка: “А у нас их не будет!”³⁰

The table 4.1 sums up the GTVN analysis of (16):

Table 4.1.

-
-
- Script opposition (SO): sex/no sex (with Maria Ivanovna), low/high culture, normal/abnormal

²⁷ “The first decree of the President of the Russian Federation: “All old jokes about Vovochka are henceforth considered to be political.”

²⁸ “After March 2, the jokes about Vovochka stop being considered political.”

²⁹ “Until March 2008, all anecdotes about Vovochka are considered to be political... After March 2008, the website udaff.com is to be shut down and all anecdotes about bears are to be considered against the law.”

The unique way in which this *anekdot* targets the current Russian president Dmitry Medvedev as well as the website udaff.com calls for comment. Similar to the *anekdoty* about Vladimir Putin, the basis for Medvedev’s *anekdoty* is the president’s name: “*medved*” in Russian means ‘bear.’ Hence, any joke that aims at bears brings with it an allusion to President Medvedev, and therefore could be considered political. Currently, of all the bear images populating the Russian mental space there is no more popular bear than the icon of the prevalent Russian Internet slang of *padonkaff*. Udaff.com is the website where this slang originated and continues to blossom.

³⁰ “Vovochka writes to his teacher: “Mar’ Ivanna! I love you!”

The teacher is outraged: “I do not like small children!”

Vovochka: “But we won’t have any children!”

- Logical Mechanism (LM): reasoning from false premises
 - Situation (SI): teacher/pupil interaction
 - Target (TA): Vovochka (and Maria Ivanovna)
 - Narrative Strategy (NS): Narrative introduction followed by dialogue
 - Language (LA): *liubliu, ne*, etc., sexual references
-

The Knowledge Resource Script Opposition of (16) is “sex/no sex” and can be abstracted into the high-level SO “normal/abnormal.” I have also added the opposition “low/high culture” as a mid-level SO as it is Vovochka’s primitive nature, savagery, and hypersexuality that thematically links the *anekdoty* about him in one cycle. The Logical Mechanism of “reasoning from false premises” establishes the grounds for Vovochka’s reply when he interprets the teacher’s answer as referring to the possible outcome of their sexual relationship, rather than to his age. The Situation is obviously that of the teacher/pupil interaction, and the target is clearly Vovochka. The Narrative Strategy is among the most common formulas for *anekdoty* in general, and the Language units are remarkably untainted by the usual *mat* expressions.

Consider now the political Vovochka *anekdot* in (17).

- (17) “Вовочка, ты кем хочешь быть когда вырастешь?”
 “Президентом, Марь Ивановна!”
 “Вовочка, но для этого надо учиться!”
 “Марь Иванна, не сушите мне мозги! Вчера записался на дзю-до. Накачаюсь, всем пасть порву, в сортире замочу! Вот увидите!”³¹

Whereas Maria Ivanovna believes that assiduous studying is needed for political success, Vovochka is confident that it is judo that will propel him into the presidency. Thus the “bodily-kinesthetic/logical intelligence” SO replaces the sexual SO of (16). As suggested by table 4.2, “reasoning from false premises” or “false analogy” are the most frequent LMs of the Soviet Vovochka *anekdoty*. Yet the political *anekdoty* often rely on the “false parallelism,” or “field restriction” LM, as in (17), to bring about laughter: as the political reality demonstrates, what

³¹ “Vovochka, what do you want to become when you grow up?”
 “President, Mar’ Ivanovna.”
 “Vovochka, you need to study for this.”
 “Mar’ Ivanovna, don’t mess with my head. Yesterday, I started judo lessons. I’ll get pumped up, break your jaw and bump you off in the shithouse! You’ll see.”

Vovochka says holds true, but for the restrictive domain of only one person. The LA is also notably different: substandard, often criminal slang that “ratchets up rhetoric of violence” (Gorham 2008) now replaces the old foul language. In point of fact, the political Vovochka *anekdoty* bring forward all aspects of Putin’s linguistic identity as depicted by Gorham 2008: technocrat, *delovoi* (man of action), *silovik* (strong man) (as in (17) above), *muzhik* (man of the people), and patriot. Frequently, the text centers on excerpts from Putin’s speeches. For instance, “в сортире замочу” in (17) comes from one of Putin’s most notorious speeches from 1999: “Мы будем преследовать террористов всюду. Если в туалете поймаем, то и в сортире их замочим” (as quoted in Gorham 2008).³²

Table 4.2.

-
-
- Script opposition: bodily-kinesthetic/logical intelligence, good/bad, normal/abnormal
 - Logical Mechanism: field restriction
 - Situation: teacher/pupil interaction
 - Target: Vovochka Putin (and Maria Ivanovna)
 - Narrative Strategy: dialogue
 - Language: political, violent jargon
-
-

The relocation of the little boy Vova with his embarrassing questions and straightforward thinking into the space of political humor represents a significant change in at least three respects. First, among all the characters populating the Russian *anekdoty*, Vovochka was the only one lacking a real-life prototype. For instance, while Chapaev is the Red Army hero of the Russian Civil War, the Soviet Vovochka was just a little boy who often embarrassed his school teacher Maria Ivanovna with his obscene remarks. Or, as Graham succinctly describes it, he is “the archetypal foul-mouthed class clown of Russian jokelore” (Graham 2003:223). The Vovochka of the post-Soviet *anekdoty* not only stands for a real political figure, but pokes fun at *the* most powerful man in Russia today, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.³³ Second, as demonstrated by (16)

³² “We will chase the terrorists everywhere. If we catch them in the lavatory, then we’ll bump them off in the shithouse.”

³³ As happened with the earlier *anekdoty* which associated Vovochka with Vladimir Lenin, the similarity of Putin’s first name with the base form Vladimir, from which the diminutive Vovochka is derived, has facilitated the adaptation process.

and (17), the Soviet and Putin Vovochka *anekdoty* share similar SI and TA KR; it is the SO, LM and LA that differentiate the two cycles.

Finally, the political *anekdoty* about Vovochka establish not only a new joke cycle, but also create a second-generation cycle, i.e., a *para-joke* cycle, cf. Attardo 2001:70. Note, however, that instead of an implicit intertextual reference, the political Vovochka *anekdoty* introduce an explicit intertextuality with the original cycle. The humorous effect achieved by double reference to the political figure of Putin as well as to the Soviet Vovochka character is remarkable: the political Vovochka *anekdoty* are among the best specimens of post-Soviet humor lore.

4.2 Sexual *Anekdoty*

Raskin 1985 divides sexual humor into four main types: i) sexual/non-sexual opposition in a sexually neutral context (overt, unspecified); ii) sexual/non-sexual opposition in an overt, specified sexual context; iii) non-sexual opposition in explicitly sexual humor; and iv) specific sexual opposition in explicitly sexual humor. Although the boundaries between these different categories are fuzzy and often blurred, instances of the third type clearly emerge as a novel tendency in the post-Soviet sexual *anekdoty*. I hypothesize that this new direction, together with the curtailed use of *mat* for humorous effect, represents the main difference between the sexual *anekdoty* in the two periods.

Draitser's "Making war, not love: gender and sexuality in Russian humor" (Draitser 1999) is the best textual study of the Russian sexual jokelore thus far. There is no sexual script left unexamined in his discussion. Numerous *anekdoty* articulate the motifs of women as prostitutes, fools, sexually insatiable creatures, and wives constantly demanding money and material things from their husbands. The "male" scripts illustrate the Russian male's sexual looseness, alcoholism, sexual prowess or lack thereof, and negative attitudes towards masturbation, cunnilingus, and orgasm. The one constant feature of all texts is that they express a male-dominant point of view. Women's denigration through oral aggression and language thus becomes the main expression of this domination. Of the numerous *anekdoty* that exemplify the sexism of the Soviet jokelore, I chose the text in (18) for two reasons: its sexual explicitness and the constant recurrence of the script of the woman's greater sexual experience:³⁴

³⁴ Draitser points out that the same script shows up in a variant joke playing on a Russian-brand car, Moscovite-412 in Ivanova (1996) as well as in Tertz (Sinyavsky) (1980) in a moderate version of the punch line: "I was her 67th, she was my 44th" (Draitser 1991:59).

- (18) A young man makes love to his sweetheart for the first time.
"My dear, I know your name is Marina. But I will call you Eve from now on," he says.
Sitting in the chair and smoking, his beloved asks: "Why?"
"Because you're the first woman in my life, as Eve was for Adam."
"Then I will be calling you Boeing."
"Why?"
"Because you're my 747th." (Private collection, as quoted in Draitser 1991:59)

Compare (18) to (19).

- (19) Парень я не городской и подключился к Интернету недавно. Ко мне сразу стали приходить предложения увеличить член. Я, конечно, понимаю, что такие письма, с абсолютно одинаковым текстом, рассылаются миллионам интернетчиков, но все равно решил им написать следующее: "Я, Федулкин – простой деревенский парень и у меня член длиной 30 сантиметров. Не верите? Спросите любого в селе Верхние Фундуки, что в Новгородской области. Поэтому не присылайте мне своих писем." Но спам приходит не перестал, а стал чуточку длиннее, потому что предложение увеличить член стало заканчиваться таким текстом: "А вот простой деревенский парень Федулкин нам поверил, и теперь у него член 30 сантиметров длиной. Не верите? Спросите любого в селе Верхние Фундуки, что в Новгородской области."³⁵

The *anekdot* in (19) is indicative of the tendency in the Russian sexual jokelore to manipulate non-sexual oppositions in explicitly sexual humor. Although sexual images immerse the reader in a sexual situation, the *anekdot's* Script Opposition is the classical "smart/dumb" opposition situated in a twenty-

³⁵ I am not a city guy and only recently got connected to Internet. Offers to enlarge my private part started coming immediately. I, of course, understand that such letters, with absolutely identical texts, are sent to millions of Internet subscribers, but all the same decided to write them the following: "I, Fedulkin, am a simple village guy and my member is 30 centimeters long. You don't believe it? Ask anybody in the village of Verkhnie Funduki (Upper Filberts) in the Novgorod region. So don't send me your letters anymore." But the spam didn't stop coming; in fact it became a little longer as the offers for member enlargement started ending with the following text: "And here is a simple village guy Fedulkin who trusted us and now his member is 30 centimeters long. You don't believe it? Ask anybody in Verkhnie Funduki located in the Novgorod region."

first century cyberspace domain. Similarly, the *anekdot* about the wealthy women mentioned in Section 3 articulates the script of obscene material excess and hedonism as opposed to shortage and harsh reality in a sexually-driven narrative; the reader's expectations are primed towards a sexual output, but are deceived by the punch line, "Ye-es, to Kolya's in Biriulevo... Do you think he remembers us?"³⁶

³⁶ У последней остановки метро ждет автобуса инженер, который допоздна делал халтуру на работе. Полдвенадцатого ночи. Автобуса нет. Он весь задубел... И тут возле него станавливается шикарный Лексус, опускается окно и девушка типа "порномодель" говорит: "Садитесь, я вас подвезу". Он отнекивается, мол денег нету...

Она: "Да какие деньги! Вы ж на бирюлевский автобус тут стоите... А как они ходят?! Садитесь, я так вас подвезу, а то замерзнете..."

Он сел назад. Поехали. Тепло. Класс. И тут она спрашивает:

"Ничего, если мы за подружкой моей заедем? Я с ней раньше договаривалась. Но это по пути... Пара минут..."

Он говорит:

"Конечно... Хозяин-барин. Какие вопросы..."

Заехали. Выходит девушка такого же калибра, как и первая. Плюхается на сиденье и говорит:

"Мань, я похавать не успела. Давай причалим к магазинчику хавки купим..."

Причалили... Та зашла... Выходит. У нее 2 бутылки французского шампанского по штучке баксов, сувенирное (на полкило) ведерочко черной икры, французские батоны, еще что-то в фирменных коробочках... Едут... Высаживают мужика... И тут та, что со жратвой говорит:

"Мань, а что мы тут в машине крошить будем?"

А та, что за рулем - мужику:

"Вы не против, если мы на пять минут к вам зайдем, перекусим и дальше поедем?"

Он извиняется, что мол, холостяцкий беспорядок, они: "Ничего... Мы ненадолго..."

Поднялись к нему. Выпили эти две бутылки. Закусили... И трахались втроем до утра. А через какое-то время эти телки прохаживаются в Доме кино по какой-то тусовке. И одна говорит:

"Как все это меня достало! Эти престарелые плейбои, этот Михалков со своими проститутками, этот Гусман старый пердун, эти все заслуженные Пидоры России... Блин, смотреть уже на них не могу."

А вторая: "Слушай, давай плюнем на это все и поедем к Коле в Бирюлево!"

Первая: "Да-а... К Коле в Бирюлево... Думаешь, он нас вспомнит?"

"An engineer was waiting for the bus at the last metro stop. He had stayed late at work and it was 12:30 at night. No bus in sight. He was completely frozen... Suddenly a flashy Lexus stopped beside him. A girl who looked like a porn star got out and said:

"Get in, I'll give you a ride."

He said no thanks, he had no money...

She said: "What money! You're waiting for the Biriulevo bus ... they don't come at this hour! Get in, I'll give you a ride. You'll freeze to death if you don't..."

Similar *anekdoty* are rare in Soviet collections. Draitser 1999 has no discussion of analogous texts. This is in no way an indication that such *anekdoty* did not exist. I interpret this state of affairs as a result of two factors. First, from the very outset of the genre, sexual explicitness was central to *anekdoty*, cf. Graham 2003:38. Second, the proliferation of sexual themes and explosion of *mat* in post-*perestroika* sexual lore has apparently reached a point of saturation which provoked a search for new ways to elicit laughter. The foul language typical of the Soviet *anekdoty* still is found in many of the examples on *anekdot.ru*. Yet, examples such as (19) demonstrate that the readership appreciates, and therefore ranks higher, texts that draw on the never-ending human curiosity in sexual themes, but do not utilize obscenities in order to achieve humorous effects.

4.3 Ethnic *Anekdoty*

Anekdoty about different ethnic minorities were particularly popular during the Soviet period. Many generations of Russians delighted in ridiculing, for instance, the affluent and crooked Georgians, the rustic, *salo*-loving and greedy Ukrainians, or the crafty and stingy Jews. Ethnic humor often engaged specific

He got in the back seat. It was warm. Fabulous. Then she suddenly asks:

“Is it ok if we pick up my friend? I made plans with her earlier. It’s on the way, it’ll only take a minute...”

He said: “Of course, whatever you want. How can you ask?”

They stopped. A girl steps out of the same caliber as the first one. She plops down on the seat and says:

“Mania, I haven’t eaten yet. Let’s drop by the store to buy something.”

They dropped by. The second girl goes in. She comes out with two bottles of vintage French Champagne, a special edition jar (half a kilo) of black caviar, French baguettes and some other goods in fancy wrapping...

They drive on... they let the man out... Then the one who wanted the grub says:

“Mania, what, are we going to scarf this down in the car?”

And the one behind the wheel says to the man:

“Do you mind if we come up for five minutes, have a bite and then go on?”

He makes excuses, a bachelor’s mess in his place, etc., but they say: “That’s ok, we won’t stay long...”

They go up to his place. Take out the two bottles. Eat the food... and the three of them fuck wildly till morning. Some time later these cows go to a grand opening at a movie theater. One says to the other:

“How sick I am of all this! These aging playboys, this Mikhalkov with his whores, that old fart Gusman, every good old faggot in Russia... I can’t even look at them anymore.”

The other one says: “Listen, let’s shove off and go see Kolya in Biriulevo!”

The first girl replies: “Oh yeah... Kolya in Biriulevo... You think he’ll remember us?”

political or sexual scripts resulting in joint scripts such as stupid political leaders or oversexed Georgians and perverted Armenians. Yet, the cultural prestige of the ethnic jokelore plummeted in the post-Soviet period. As already discussed in Section 3, currently the *anekdoty* about ethnic groups is the least productive sub-genre, yielding to a cycle aimed at New Russians.

Scholars have already noted the resemblance between the New Russian *anekdoty* and those featuring ethnic minorities, mainly people from the Caucasus (Georgians, Armenians, etc.) and Jews, cf. Draitser 1983, Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002, Graham 2003. Except for Graham, who interprets the word “Russian” in the phrase “New Russian” as “an ironic reference to the perceived usurpation of Russian wealth by non-Russians” (Graham 2003:227), the rest fail to recognize the outright *ethnic* facets of the New Russians jokelore.³⁷ Draitser even erroneously views the cycle as “a sign of a healthy tendency on the part of the Russian group, of a strengthening of the sense of identity by Russians who have begun to look for culprits within their own group, not outside of it” (Draitser 1983:159). As I assert in Hristova (forthcoming), the *anekdoty* about the New Russians share the principal characteristics of ethnic humor as defined by Davies 1982, and are therefore best interpreted as ethnic.

The script of stupidity, often associated with specific qualities such as conspicuous appearance, idiosyncratic use of language, and contemptuous attitudes towards cultural values is the principal parameter that brings together Soviet ethnic jokes and post-Soviet jokes about the New Russians. The *anekdot* in (20) features the prototypical Georgian conscripted in the Russian jokelore: affluent (signified by his oversized hat and sheepskin coat impossible to find in stores), materialistic and uncultured, inept in Russian:

(20) Стоит грузин в дубленке и ондатровой шапке на Тверской и деньги считает. Идет мимо студент в тоненьком пальтишке и спрашивает: “Скажите, пожалуйста, как пройти в Большой театр?” Грузин, не прекращая считать деньги: “Дэлом займись, дарагой, дэлом!”³⁸

Language distortion typical in ethnic jokes also underpins the jokelore prototype of the New Russian. Yet, whereas the anecdotal Georgian is unable to

³⁷ Shmeleva & Shmelev (2002) recognize the fact that “некоторые советские анекдоты о грузинах рассказывают сейчас как анекдоты о новых русских” (“some Soviet *anekdoty* about the Georgians are now told as *anekdoty* about the New Russians”).

³⁸ On the corner of *Tverskaia* Street in Moscow, a Georgian wearing a sheepskin coat and muskrat hat stands counting money. A student wearing a thin overcoat passes by and asks, “Excuse me, would you tell me how to get to the Bolshoi Theater?” The Georgian replies without interrupting his counting: “You should get yourself a real business, man, real business.”

master the phonology and/or morphology of the Russian language, e.g., depalatalizes *d* in front of *e* in *delo* or fully reduces the unstressed *o* in *dorogoi*, the anecdotal New Russian's language deficiency lies mainly in the semantic field. In addition to interpreting everyday situations in their own idiosyncratic ways, cf. the *anekdot* about the opera glasses in (2) above, the New Russians construe a foul meaning for each ordinary Russian word:³⁹

(21) Разговаривают двое новых русских.

“Слушай, братан, ты за сколько стометровку пробежишь?”

“Ну, за пару тыщ, наверно, соглашусь.”⁴⁰

(22) A judge tells the New Russian defendant, “You may say your last word to the court.”

“One million – and not a cent more.”⁴¹

5. Conclusions

Post-Soviet *anekdoty* do not differ significantly from Soviet humorous texts in terms of the script oppositions they feature. This holds especially true for the sexual *anekdoty*, which continue to show preference for overt and specified sexual/non-sexual script oppositions by superimposing sexual abnormality in all of its forms and shapes onto sexually accepted norms. While reflecting the new political and socio-economic reality, the political and ethnic *anekdoty* adjusted old, well-liked, and witty themes rather than expanding the range of the Script Opposition parameter. Undoubtedly, an important reason for this failure is the fact that after *perestroika*, political and ethnic humor lost the cachet they enjoyed during communism.

Post-Soviet *anekdoty*, however, display an array of novel tendencies that trigger immense humorous reactions, judging by the readers' comments posted on *anekdot.ru*. In the class of sexual *anekdoty*, the Knowledge Resources of Language and Situation set apart the humorous texts of 2007. In addition, a novel sub-type of Script Opposition that did not exist in Soviet humor was introduced by setting non-sexual oppositions in explicitly sexual humor situations. The post-

³⁹ See Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002 for more discussion of the jokelore language of the New Russians.

⁴⁰ Two New Russians are having a conversation.

“Listen, bro, how much will it take you to run 100 meters?”

“Um, for a couple of thousands, I guess, I'll do it.”

⁴¹ Cf. Draitser 2001.

Soviet political *anekdoty* feature a renaissance of the meta-*anekdot*, the main result of which was the transfer of the Vovochka cycle into the political domain.⁴² Based on explicit intertextuality with the original *anekdoty*, the political Vovochka *anekdoty* also established a para-joke cycle generating some of the best humorous narratives. If one excludes *anekdoty* about New Russians from the realm of ethnic humor, it needs to be admitted that this sub-genre is almost non-existent in the current humor space.⁴³ Agreeing, however, that the jokeloric New Russians are an ethnic rather than a social archetype, the new ethnic *anekdoty* exhibit a noteworthy verbalization of their main script opposition “dumb/smart,” as in the following *anekdot* that explicitly treats the ethnicity issue:

- (23) “You know, I surgically changed my nationality.”
 “Can it really be true? You became a Jew?”
 “No. I became a ‘New Russian.’ I asked the surgeon to crook my fingers.”
 (<http://jokes.variousstuff.net/joke/954.html>)

The Language thus becomes the main Knowledge Resource that produces the humorous effect not only in the ethnic *anekdoty*, but in the genre as a whole.

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⁴² See Graham 2002 for more on Russo-Soviet meta-jokes.

⁴³ The *anekdoty* about the Chukchi’s, one of the staples of the Soviet ethnic jokelore, however, continue to thrive. Further research is needed to account for the continued existence of the Chukchi humor stereotype.

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