

Sogu HONG  
Seoul, Korea

Согу ГОНГ  
Сеул, Корея

## UKRAINIAN ETHNIC JOKES IN CANADA\* УКРАЇНСЬКІ НАРОДНІ ЖАРТИ У КАНАДІ

*Ukrainian ethnic jokes have been in oral circulation for a long time and still enjoy widespread popularity in Canada. Ukrainian ethnic jokes involve negative stereotypes concerning Ukrainian individuals or Ukrainian groups. However, Ukrainian ethnic jokes simultaneously perpetuate the desire for identity, individuality and separateness in terms of ethnicity. Ukrainians enjoy Ukrainian ethnic jokes, because they encourage strong ethnic identity and emphasize that ethnic identity is permanent. At present, it is true that Ukrainian ethnic jokes are more often told amongst Ukrainians. It might be because of their need for social cohesion, a need not felt amongst majority or dominant groups who do not face the dilemma of choosing between acculturation and the maintenance of distinct ethnic identity.*

*Keywords: ethnic jokes, humor, folklore, Ukrainian Canadian, immigrant culture.*

### I. Introduction

Ukrainian ethnic jokes have been in oral circulation for a long time and still enjoy widespread popularity in Canada. The popularity and variety of Ukrainian ethnic jokes provide a fertile ground to study Ukrainian verbal lore. Like other ethnic jokes, Ukrainian ethnic jokes involve negative stereotypes concerning Ukrainian individuals or Ukrainian groups, emphasizing their negative traits. When we study the nature of Ukrainian ethnic jokes, their relationship to socio-cultural systems, and their forms and functions, we can understand the reason that they are based on the negative traits of Ukrainians and why they are told by both Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians.

In this paper, Ukrainian ethnic jokes are defined as a type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality, or other traits of Ukrainians by virtue of their specific socio-cultural identity. I collected ethnic jokes mainly from people who live in Edmonton, Canada. They are largely divided into two groups; in-group (Ukrainians) and out-group (non-Ukrainians). Also I collected several jokes from reference books and articles pertaining to Ukrainian ethnic jokes.

The theoretical part of my study is mainly based on *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*<sup>1</sup>, written by M.L.Apte, and *A Basic Guide to Fieldwork for Beginning Folklore Students*<sup>2</sup>, edited by Carl Lindahl. *Humor and Laughter* has a separate chapter for ethnic humor and suggests important research topics, such as stereotypes, forms and types, and contextual determinants.

I obtained information on the characteristics and functions of Ukrainian ethnic jokes from "The Ethnic jokes in Canada Today" in *Keynote Folklore Quarterly* (Winter 1970)<sup>3</sup>, "Folk Narrative among Ukrainian-Canadians in Western Canada" in *Canadian Center for Folk Culture Studies Paper № 44*, and "Humor" in *Continuity and Change: The Cultural Life of Alberta's First Ukrainians*<sup>5</sup> written by Robert B.Klymasz.

For this study, I propose three hypotheses. First, Ukrainian ethnic jokes are more often told in Canada than in Ukraine because ethnic jokes are much more likely to occur in society where

---

\* This work was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2012.

Ukrainians belong to a minority group, such as Canada or the United States, not in highly homogeneous society.

Second, stereotypes of Ukrainians, reflected in Ukrainian ethnic jokes in Canada are different from those in Ukraine. It is because contextual factors, which influence Ukrainian ethnic jokes, are different in Canada as compared to Ukraine.

Third, old Ukrainian ethnic jokes are different from new ones in Canada because jokes have been influenced by Canadian social system and culture.

Concerning these hypotheses, I also studied the forms and types of Ukrainian ethnic jokes, techniques and their functions. My study is mainly based on one to one interviews, recorded on tape. I also prepared a questionnaire and collected information in written form.

The subject group in my study is largely divided into two categories: In-group: Ukrainian / Out-group: Non-Ukrainian. Each group is also divided into two categories:

- 1) In-group A: Ukrainians who were born in Canada.  
B: Ukrainians who came from Ukraine or other countries recently.
- 2) Out-group A: Other ethnic people who were born in Canada.  
B: Other ethnic people who came from Ukraine or other countries.

#### Informants (10 people)

##### In-group A

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Ethnic Root	Occupation
1	Paul Yzda	M	20 – 30	Ukrainian	student
2	Greg Skrypiczajko	M	20 – 30	Ukrainian	student
3	Maria Kotovyca	F	20 – 30	Ukrainian	student
4	Susan Niawchuk	F	20 – 30	Ukrainian	student

##### In-group B

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Ethnic Root	Occupation
1	Volodymyr Chornyj	M	30 – 40	Ukrainian	Freelancer
2	Natalia Shostak	F	20 – 30	Ukrainian	student

##### Out-group A

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Ethnic Root	Occupation
1	Frances Falkenberg	F	50 – 60	Swedish-French	retired teacher
2	Kirby Simpson	M	20 – 30	French-English	student

##### Out-group B

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Ethnic Root	Occupation
1	Yuri Novikov	M	30 – 40	Russian-Ukrainian	student
2	Ben	M	40 – 50	Ukrainian	business owner

#### Evaluation of Interview

I had difficulties in finding informants who belonged to out-group A. Since many Ukrainian ethnic jokes are discriminatory, most people are reluctant to tell them. One of my informants asked me to erase the tape after the interview and did not allow me to make a transcript of his interview. Judging from the reaction of out-group members, it seems to be difficult to find and record the natural contexts of joke-telling by this group.

Another problem is that the occupations of informants are not varied. Given that jokes are often told in the workplace, I should have found several workers, farmers, or salesmen. I should mention that no informant is over 60 or under 20. Compared to younger people, older people have had more of a chance to hear Ukrainian ethnic jokes. Also, many jokes are created and told by children at school. If I had found more informants in these age groups, I could have proved how varied Ukrainian ethnic jokes are.

Even though my study has certain limitations, my search was generally well conducted. The age range of my informants is not narrow. Certainly the informants gave me sufficient information to prove my hypotheses.

## II. Contextual determinants and Ukrainian stereotypes

### Hypothesis 1:

Ukrainian ethnic jokes are more often told in Canada than in Ukraine because ethnic jokes are much more likely to occur in society where Ukrainians belong to a minority group.

### Data

#### In-group A:

Paul – 7 jokes / Greg – 4 / Maria – 1/2 / Susan – 0

#### In-group B:

Volodymyr – 0 (about Ukrainians), 1 (about Moldavians), 1 (about Russians)  
Natalka – 2 (about Ukrainians), 2 (about Russians) / Boychuk – 0 (about Ukrainians)

#### Out-group A:

Frances – 2 (about Ukrainians)  
Kirby – 4 (about Ukrainians)

#### Out-group B:

Yuri – 4 (about Ukrainians)  
Ben – 1 (about Ukrainians)

### Analysis

The data seems to testify that this hypothesis is right. Informants of in-group A remember many Ukrainian ethnic jokes. Ukrainians who came from Ukraine recently remember other ethnic jokes better than Ukrainian ethnic jokes. Volodymyr and Boychuk, who came from Ukraine, could not remember any Ukrainian ethnic jokes, even though they mentioned that they had heard several. Only Natalka, who also came from Ukraine, told two Ukrainian jokes, which she heard in Edmonton.

Yuri, who came from Minsk, remembered many Ukrainian ethnic jokes. Yuri said that the people of Minsk told Ukrainian ethnic jokes more often than Russian or Belarusian ethnic jokes. Thus Ukrainian ethnic jokes are likely to occur where Ukrainians belong to a minority group, such as in Canada or in Minsk.

However, it is difficult to generalize this hypothesis because the research group is too small for this study. According to Natalka, in Ukraine, she heard about sixty or seventy Ukrainian jokes about Ukrainians. Judging from her interview, many Ukrainian ethnic jokes are also told in Ukraine.

### Hypothesis 2:

Stereotypes of Ukrainians in Ukrainian ethnic jokes in Canada are different from those of Ukrainian ethnic jokes in Ukraine or other countries because contextual factors, which influence Ukrainian ethnic jokes, are different.

### Ukrainian ethnic jokes in Canada.

1. Q: How do you get an one-armed Ukrainian out of a tree?  
A: Wave at him.
2. Q: Why don't Ukrainians like to eat M&Ms?  
A: It's hard to peel them.
3. Q: How many Ukrainians are needed to change a lightbulb?  
A: Three hundred and one. One to hold the lightbulb and three hundred to turn the house around.
4. A Ukrainian was walking down the street with a piece of wood. A man stopped and said, "Hey, are you a pole vaulter?", The Ukrainian said, "No I'm a Ukrainian, but how did you know my name is Walter?"
5. Q: Why did the Ukrainian break his arm raking leaves?  
A: He fell out of a tree.

### Ukrainian ethnic jokes in other countries

1. When three Russians get together you get a primary communist party organization, three Ukrainians – Ukrainian Academy of Science, three Jews – "Trio bandurystiv" (three bandura [Ukrainian musical instrument] players).
2. Where a Jew was there is nothing to do for a Russian, but where a Ukrainian was there is nothing to do for a Jew.
3. In 1961 when Gagarin made his space flight, in a small village in Western Ukraine, a small boy was running home from school:  
Boy – Voiko (Uncle), you know, Moskali (Russians) have gone into the space?  
Uncle – (With smile on his face): Як, yci? (How, all of them?)
4. A Ukrainian and a poor African student traveled in the same compartment on a train. The African got hungry, but had no food with him or money. The Ukrainian got some bacon (salo) out of his bag and began eating, with great pleasure. The African couldn't turn his eyes from the bacon. The Ukrainians, seeing that, asked: "You like bacon, eh?" – "Yes, very much," replied the African. "All right," said the Ukrainian. "Do you have father?" – "Yes," said the African. "Then," said the Ukrainian, "write to him, and ask to send you some bacon too."

### Analysis

According to the data, in Canada, Ukrainians are generally described as foolish. However, in other countries (e.g. Minsk), Ukrainian ethnic jokes portray various traits of Ukrainians. Some jokes describe Ukrainians as misers and boasters. Other describes Ukrainians as people who are interested in learning or who are usually divided into several political sects.

What makes stereotypes of Ukrainians in Canada different from those in Ukraine? In my opinion, the different historical experiences of Ukrainians in Canada might make them different from each other. If we consider that the first Ukrainians were poor farmers who did not speak English, we can imagine how Anglophones regarded Ukrainians at that time and we can understand why Ukrainians are described as dim witted.

According to Yuri, Ukrainian ethnic jokes in Minsk also often describe Ukrainians as foolish. But he added that in Minsk, Ukrainian ethnic jokes are more offensive than in Canada<sup>6</sup>. In other words, Ukrainians or other ethnic groups are described as worse than fools. In my opinion, this is because of crucial historical relationship between Ukrainians and Russians or Ukrainians and other ethnic groups. Many jokes reflect these historical relationships. In these jokes, we can see the national feelings Ukrainians have against Russians, Poles, or Jews. These jokes are also inclined to focus on specific ethnic traits.

### Hypothesis 3:

The nature of old Ukrainian ethnic jokes has changed because socio-culture has changed in Canada.

#### Data

1. Q: Did you hear about the Ukrainian who went ice-fishing?  
A: He brought back four hundred pounds of ice<sup>7</sup>.
2. Q: How did a Ukrainian die in ice-fishing?  
A: He got run over by the Zamboni.
3. Ukrainians went ice-fishing, but they didn't catch anything, because they took all day just to cut a hole big enough for a boat.

#### Analysis

I could not find many differences between old and new Ukrainian ethnic jokes. However, I found several important changes concerning Ukrainian ethnic jokes. First, many variants of old jokes appear. According to data, the jokes about ice-fishing have many variants and enjoy widespread popularity. Second, "dialect" or language jokes are rarely told at the present time. In my opinion, this is because today "broken English" is less often heard amongst Ukrainians in Canada. However, with new Ukrainians immigrating to Canada, it could be possible to hear new Ukrainian jokes concerning language somewhere in the country. Third, Ukrainian jokes are more often old amongst Ukrainians than amongst other ethnic groups. Due to the emphasis on human rights and concerns about racial discrimination, in the school, the work place, and the family, out-group rarely tell ethnic jokes which often look down on people. Nevertheless, Ukrainian ethnic jokes are still popular among Ukrainian groups and created by Ukrainian themselves.

### III. Forms and types of Ukrainian ethnic jokes

#### A) Riddle-jokes

A popular type of ethnic joke is a combination of a joke and a riddle. The joke takes the form of a question and answer, the answer usually revealing some stereotypic attribute of an ethnic group mentioned in the question<sup>8</sup>. Robert B.Klymasz introduces some examples of introductory, riddling question taken from the Ukrainian joke cycle in Western Canada in his article "The Ethnic Jokes in Canada Today," in *Keystone Folklore Quarterly*. According to him, these introductory questions usually focus on distinguishing ethnic features and qualities. However, the answer is usually not a satisfactory but offers a formulation that is distorting, absurd and completely inapplicable<sup>9</sup>. The following are examples of riddle jokes taken from a student's article "The ethnic joke and sense of community"<sup>10</sup>, written by Grant Renney.

1. Q: What's the new Ukrainian motorcycle called?  
A: Kubasaki.
2. Q: At a Ukrainian wedding how can you tell who is the Ukrainian bride?  
A: She's the one with the braided armpits.
3. Q: In a chorus line how can you tell a Ukrainian?  
A: She's the one that sticks to the floor when they do the splits.

#### B) Jokes with Gestures and Actions

Gestures or actions appear in some ethnic riddle-jokes. According to Mahadev L.Apte, there are two types of jokes: First, the narrator performs an action or makes a gesture and usually asks the question "what is this?" Second, the narrator of a joke asks a question pertaining to a trait of an ethnic individual and supplies the answer by way of a gesture or an action<sup>11</sup>. The following are

examples of the first form of jokes with gestures and actions.

1. Q: What is this?

A: You pull your pants part way down, then put your finger at that point. Then smell your finger and say, "A Ukrainian doing crack (cocaine)".

2. Q: How does a Ukrainian tie his shoe?

A: A Ukrainian stands by a chair, places his right leg on the seat, bends down to his left foot on the floor and ties this left shoe.

### C) Jokes in the form of proverbs

Several jokes have the form of proverbs, which are usually short, two-part expressions. The following are examples of jokes in the form of proverbs.

1. Where three Ukrainians get together, there will be two political organizations.

2. Where three Russians get together, you get a primary communist party organization, three Ukrainians – Ukrainian Academy of Science, three Jews – "Tryo bandurystiv".

3. Where a Jew was there is nothing to do for a Russian, but where a Ukrainian was there is nothing to do for a Jew.

### D) Definition

Some jokes define Ukrainians as garlic eaters or morons.

1. Ukrainians – garlic eaters.

2. Q: What's the definition of a maniac?

A: A Ukrainian in a whorehouse with a credit card<sup>12</sup>.

### E) Dialogue in a short story

Jokes often have a short story form. In this case, more than two people appear in a story and the story finishes with dialogue.

1. Two Ukrainians saw two guys fishing out in the middle of a field, and one says to the other, "Look at those two dummies out there trying to fish, maybe we should tell them what's going on." And the other one says, "How the hell are we going to do that? We haven't got a boat"<sup>13</sup>.

2. A young man answers his uncle (in Western Ukraine):

Boy – Ах, Войку, ви не маєте рації? (Oh, Voyko, you're right?)

Uncle (feeling offended) – Може, рації і не маю, зате кулемет і досі в городі закопаний! (Maybe, I am not right, but the gun is still buried in the garden until now.)

3. A Ukrainian with a frog on his shoulder goes into a bar, and the bartender said, "Hey you, you can't come in here with that." Frog said, "well, it started out as a wart on my ass, and it grew into this!"

4. There were a few people on an airplane flying over Alberta. Unfortunately, engine trouble broke out. But there were only two parachutes. A Ukrainian man first jumped up from the plane. An English man said to a German, "That's OK. There are still two parachutes left. The Ukrainian guy jumped with nap-sack."

#### IV. Techniques used in Ukrainian ethnic jokes

##### A) "Accent" or pronunciation.

Accent or pronunciation is often used in ethnic jokes. If a few features and sounds are identified as characteristic of a particular language, people use them in language jokes. Since Russian pronunciation is different from that of Ukrainian, the following joke points out a different sound.

A conversation between two western Ukrainian peasants:

- Слухай, а ти занєш як москалі називають наше пиво?  
(Listen, do you know how Russians call our beer?)
- Як? (how?)
- Пі-і-во? (pi-i-vo)
- От гади... (those bastards... )

##### B) Exaggeration.

Exaggeration plays an important role in ethnic jokes. Exaggeration in ethnic jokes makes people more ridiculous. Amongst Ukrainian ethnic jokes in Canada, jokes about a lightbulb and ice-fishing use this technique.

1.Q: How many Ukrainians are needed to change a lightbulb?

A: Three hundred and one. One to hold the lightbulb and three hundred to turn the house around.

2.Q: Did you hear about the Ukrainian who went ice-fishing?

A: He brought back four hundred pounds of ice.

#### V. The function of Ukrainian ethnic jokes

Most informants mentioned that Ukrainian ethnic jokes bring not hostility but humor to our society. Even though Ukrainian ethnic jokes were at first based on prejudice and hostility, informants felt that Ukrainian ethnic jokes help people escape from the monotony of daily life.

Paul Yzda mentioned that Ukrainian ethnic jokes make closer relationship between other ethnic people and himself. He often tell Ukrainian ethnic jokes to people to break the ice<sup>14</sup>.

Ukrainian ethnic jokes simultaneously perpetuate the desire for identity, individuality and separateness in terms of ethnicity. Ukrainians enjoy Ukrainian ethnic jokes, because they encourage strong ethnic identity and emphasize that ethnic identity is permanent. At present, it is true that Ukrainian ethnic jokes are more often told amongst Ukrainians. It might be because of their need for social cohesion, a need not felt amongst majority or dominant groups who do not face the dilemma of choosing between acculturation and the maintenance of distinct ethnic identity<sup>15</sup>.

The function that these jokes play when out-group members create and tell ethnic jokes, should also be noted. According to Mahadev L.Apte, out-group people tell ethnic jokes to strengthen their ethnocentrism. He states that thinking of other cultures and people as inferior is one way of strengthening self-image. Prejudice reinforces ethnocentrism, just as negation of the cultural values of other people nurtures self-esteem and feeling of superiority.

However, ethnic traits seen as negative by out-groups are viewed as positive by ingroups. We can find the evidence from Greg's interview.

How do you get off an one-armed Ukrainian out of tree? The answer is that you wave to him. They also make Ukrainian people seem to be unintelligent. But I think that it also portrays Ukrainian people quite friendly<sup>16</sup>.

All informants of in-group A mentioned that negative traits which were told in Ukrainian ethnic jokes made people laugh in our society rather than bother people. Most informants said that a joke is just a joke and it is for fun. Therefore, Ukrainian ethnic jokes are widely told within both in-group and out-group.

## VI. Conclusion

Ukrainian ethnic jokes are more likely to be present where Ukrainians belong to minority or subordinate groups. No matter who made the Ukrainian ethnic jokes, they enjoy widespread popularity within both in-group and out-group. On the one hand, Ukrainian ethnic jokes help in-group people to strengthen Ukrainian identity. On the other hand, they bring feelings of superiority to out-group people. If we consider that Ukrainians also tell many other ethnic jokes, such as Russian jokes, Moldavian jokes, Polish jokes, Jewish jokes, and so on, ethnic joke telling must be a common phenomenon in multi-ethnic societies where majority and minority groups are existing.

Ukrainian ethnic jokes reflect the historical experiences of Ukrainians, the relationship between Ukrainians and other ethnic groups, and the behavior, customs, personality, or any other traits of Ukrainians. Therefore, Ukrainian ethnic jokes are like a window or mirror through which we can see the face of Ukrainian culture.

<sup>1</sup> Mahadev L. Apte. *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. – Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Lindahl, ed. *A Basic Guide to Fieldwork for Beginning Folklore Students*. Folklore Monographs Series. Vol. 7 – Bloomington: Folklore Publications Group, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Klymasz Robert B. *The Ethnic Joke in Canada Today* // *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 15, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Klymasz Robert B. *Mushrooms on the Freeway* // *Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies Paper*. No. 4, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Klymasz, Robert B. *Humor // Continuity and Change: The Cultural Life of Alberta's First*. – Edmonton: CIUS, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Yuri Novikov, interview by Sogu Hong (2003).

<sup>7</sup> Klymasz Robert B. *Folk Narrative Among Ukrainian-Canadians in Western Canada: Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies Paper*. No. 4, 1973. – P. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Mahadev L. Apte. *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* – Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985. – P. 116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* – P. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Grant Renney. *The Ethnic Joke and Sense of Community*. Unpublished paper. – University of Manitoba, 1989. – P. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Grant Renney. – *Op. cit.* – P. 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* – PP. 7 – 8.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Yzda, Interview by Sogu Hong (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Mahadev L. Apte. – *Op. cit.* – P. 143.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Skrypiczajko, interview by Sogu Hong (2003).

*Українські народні жарти присутні у Канаді упродовж тривалого часу й досі популярні серед місцевих українців. У цих жартах висміюються негативні риси як окремих українців, так і спільнот. Водночас, в українських народних жартах підкреслюється прагнення до збереження національної ідентичності, індивідуальності та самобутності в плані етнічної приналежності. Українці полюбляють народні жарти, тому що вони сприяють посиленню етнічної ідентичності і підкреслюють, що ця ідентичність є постійною. Сьогодні більшість українських народних жартів зміцнює соціальну єдність, зменшує небезпеку розчинитись серед домінуючих етнічних груп, які не стикаються з дилемою вибору між акультурацією і збереженням чіткої етнічної ідентичності.*

*Ключові слова: народні жарти, гумор, фольклор, українські канадці, іммігрантська культура.*

*Украинские народные шутки существуют в Канаде на протяжении длительного времени и до сих пор популярны среди местных украинцев. В этих шутках высмеиваются отри-*

*цательные черты как отдельных украинцев, так и сообществ. В то же время, в украинских народных шутках подчеркивается стремление к сохранению национальной идентичности, индивидуальности и самобытности в плане этнической принадлежности. Украинцы любят народные шутки, потому что они способствуют усилению этнической идентичности и подчеркивают, что эта идентичность является постоянной. Большинство украинских народных шуток укрепляют чувство социального единства, уменьшают опасность растворения среди доминирующих этнических групп, которые не сталкиваются с дилеммой выбора между аккультурацией и сохранением четкой этнической идентичности.*

*Ключевые слова: народные шутки, юмор, фольклор, украинские канадцы, иммигрантская культура.*