



Translatability of Humor via a Socio-Linguistic Lens: An Empirical Study of Yiddish Jokes

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Theoretical Studies of Humor (1)

- Theoretical studies attempt to account for the nature of the jokes (what makes the joke funny) and reactions to humor (Schultz & Horibe, 1974);
- Different views on the contribution of the *original language* in which the joke is formulated and *the culture* with which it is associated (Chiaro, 2008).
- Degree of translatability of jokes (Chiaro, 2008)

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Theoretical Studies of Humor (2)

- **Superiority Theory** (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940 cited in Duncan, 1985): people will laugh at situations or people that make them feel better about themselves
e.g: *in reaction to seeing someone else tripping on a banana peel*
- **Incongruity Theory (Attardo, 2010)**: humor arises from unusual combination of elements

There are three things a person never tires on observing: fire burning, water flowing, and another person working.

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Present study & significance

- Lack of empirical studies and limited to comprehension of jokes in brain-damaged patients (e.g. Winner, et al. 1998) and children (e.g. Schultz & France, 1974)
- Empirical study on understanding and translatability of joke
→ **Aim**: disentangle *cultural* and *linguistic* component in understanding of incongruity
-Yiddish humor hasn't been studied before in context of translation
- **Empirical approach**: combinations of methodology used in previous studies (e.g. exposure to the same audio-recorded incongruous jokes, appreciation of degree of humor on a scale etc) on development and loss of humor and own innovations

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Present Study: Focus on Hasidic Yiddish Jokes

Hasidic Jewish Culture:

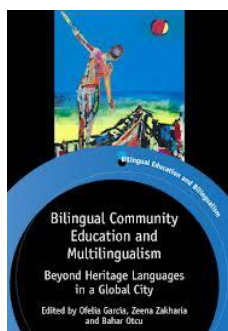
- Set of common beliefs and collective religious practices
- Distinct from other Jewish groups: social structure around leadership of Rebbe
- Strict rules that apply to dress codes and specific rituals and social norms (Baumgarten, 2006)
- Largest group of native Yiddish speakers today

Hasidic Yiddish in NYC

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Present Study: Focus on Hasidic Yiddish Jokes

1. Spanish
2. Chinese
3. Russian
4. Haitian (Creole)
5. Italian
6. French
7. Yiddish
8. Korean
9. African Languages
10. Polish
11. Tagalog
12. Greek

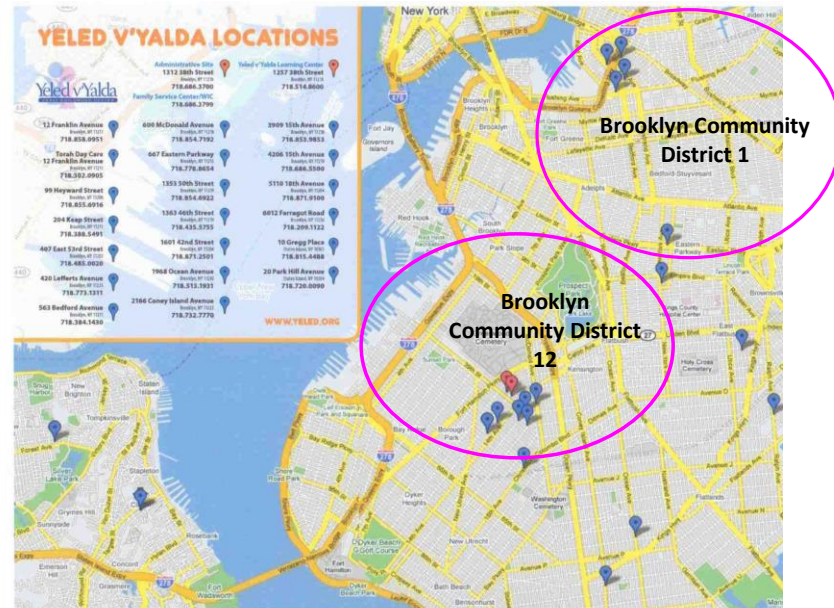


13. Arabic
14. Hebrew
15. (Bengali)
16. Urdu
17. Hindi
18. German
19. Japanese
20. Serbo-croatian
21. Portuguese
22. Persian
23. Vietnamese
24. Hungarian
25. Gujarati

Languages Other Than English (LOTE) spoken by New Yorkers over 5 years of age, US Census Bureau (2009) American Community Survey Table B160001 in Garcia, Zakharia & Otcu, 2013, p13.

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Demographic and Institutional Contexts



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Innovative Methodology

- All participants exposed to the audio-recordings of the same jokes in Yiddish and in English
- All Hasidic Yiddish speakers familiar with Hasidic Jewish Culture
- Non-Yiddish speakers of English: different degrees of familiarity with Jewish Culture
- Asked to rate and explain jokes: comparison of ratings of jokes across the two languages and groups and exploration of the role of familiarity with the culture

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

YIDDISH PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS

Degree of religiosity

- A. Raised in the Hasidic community and still currently a member in the community
 B. Raised Hassidic but not currently involved in the community.

Yiddish

Currently still speaks Yiddish *all the time, occasionally, rarely or never.*

ENGLISH PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS

Background in relation to Jewish religion and culture

Multiple choice options: *Modern Orthodox Jewish, Conservative or Reform Jewish, Unaffiliated Jewish, Not Jewish at all, or other category* (Adapted from Bunin- Benor, 2010)

Familiarity with Hasidic Culture

- *Observant Jewish residing in Jewish community,*
- *Observant Jewish outside the community, exposed to Jewish holidays and culture,*
- *Not Jewish: Exposed to Jewish people, or holidays but not Hasidim vs. minimal exposure to anything Jewish culture related, or Jews.*

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Jokes and their translations

אײנער האט גענומען בלוט נאך חודש תשרי און סאיז צוריקגעקומען בלויז פײש זאפט

transliteration: einer hut genimen blit nuch choidesh tishre. in siz tzirikgekimen bloiz fish zaft.

Literal translation: someone had taken blood after month Tishrei and it returned just fish sauce

Translation: Someone took a blood test after the month of tishrei (the high holy days) and the results came back: pure fish sauce. (Cultural knowledge: Jewish people eat a ton of fish in that month)

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Jokes and their translations (Cont'd)

וואס איז שנעלער ווי א פעני וואס קוילערט זיך אראפ א בארג?
דער גאליציאנער וואס לויפט עס נאך

transliteration: Vus iz shneler vee ah Penny vus kohlert zich arup ah barg?
Der Galitzianer vus loift es nuch

Literal Translation: What is faster than a penny that roll itself down a hill?
The Galician that runs it after

Translation: What is faster than a penny rolling down a hill?
The Galicianer chasing it.

-This can be translated / understood in English and/or by someone not familiar with Jewish culture and Hasidic regional groups is you substitute the Galicianer with "Jewish" , or any person where a miserly or stingy stereotype can be applied.

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Participants

- **Yiddish Group 1: Speakers of Hasidic Yiddish**

15 including 9 females and 6 males

Age range: 11x 18-35, 3x 36-45, and 1x 46-55

- **English Group 2: non-Yiddish speakers of English,**

15 including 6 males and 9 females,

Age range: 14x 18-35, 1x 36-45

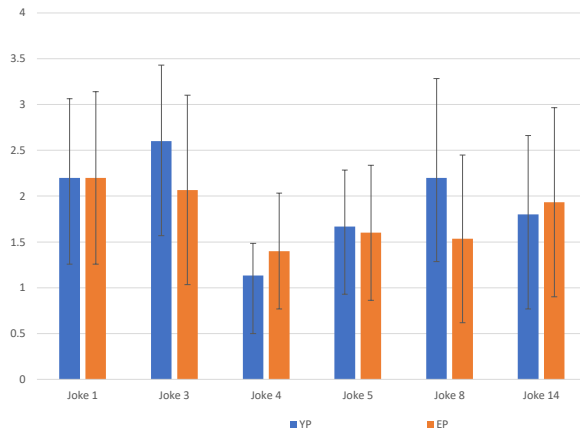
7x Jewish, 8x non Jewish

Among Jewish: 12 formerly orthodox, ? atheist/secular

Among non Jewish: varying degrees of exposure to Jewish culture

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Result 1: Mainstream American Culture Jokes funniness ratings



Example:

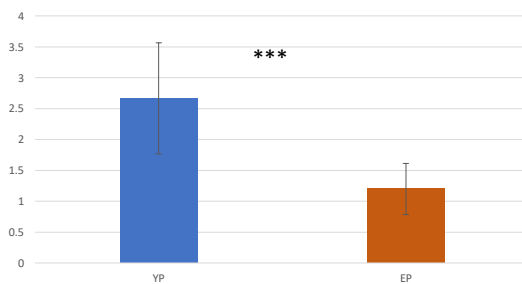
If Hillary won the elections what would her husband be?

Adam the first (Biblically 'the first man'), Adam after sinning

No significant difference in ratings between **Yiddish-speaking** participants and **English-speaking** participants

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Results 2: Joke 11- Jewish Culture Joke funniness ratings



Joke 11

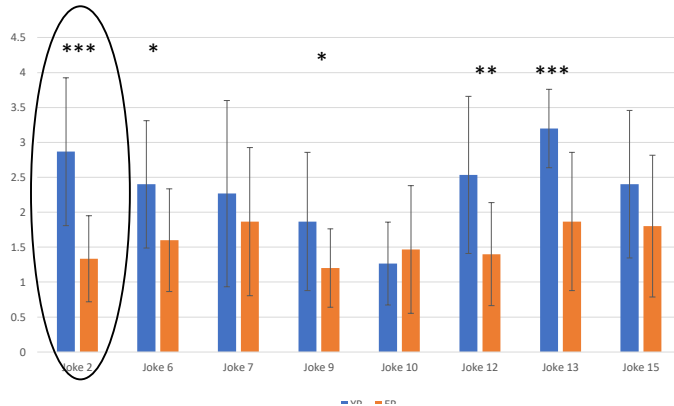
“When Jews have a *Seder*, they ask, *what is different?*” Double entendre /Play on words- *Seder* means “Passover meal” as well as “organization” in Hebrew.

Ma nishtanah refers to what’s different on Passover night compared to the rest of the nights? But here it also means, “why is there no chaos now?”

Significant difference in ratings between **Yiddish-speaking** participants and **English-speaking** participants

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Result 3: Hasidic Jewish Culture jokes funniness ratings



Example: Joke 2- Disclaimer

A woman says

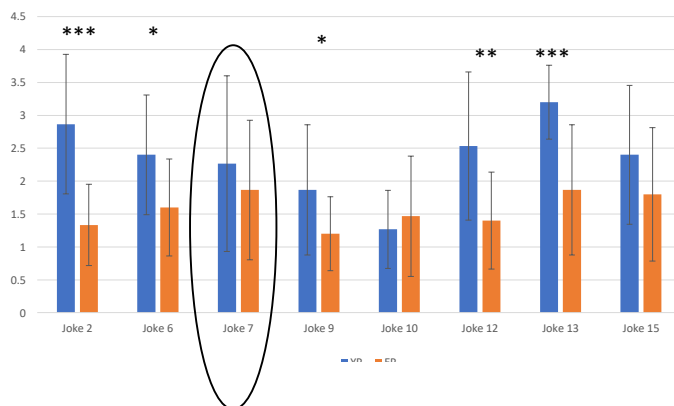
"I have 2 sons. One is a Rabbi, the other one is just a thief"

Cultural equivalent (dark humor)

Significant differences in funniness ratings for 5 out 8 Hasidic Jewish Culture jokes, between **Yiddish speaking** participants and **English-speaking** participants

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Result 3: Hasidic Jewish Culture jokes funniness ratings



Example: Joke 7- Disclaimer

"Rabbis recently prohibited the use of blackberries, as they are loaded with bugs." (Dated joke)

Surprisingly, this works really well in English as both *Blackberries* and *bugs* have a double meaning.

-The *fruit is forbidden* as bugs are not allowed to be ingested according to Orthodox law.

-The *smart-phone is forbidden* and also can contain "bugs".

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Results: Disentangling linguistic and cultural factor

- **Among English Group 2 participants, do those participants closest to Jewish Hasidic Culture better able to understand jokes in translation?**

→ **Two sets of Pearson correlation were calculated**

A. Individual ratings of **Jewish Culture Joke (Joke 11)** & 1. Jewish Culture and 2. Yiddish words/expressions & 3. Composite Score that combine both : no significant correlation

B. Individual participants mean ratings of **Hasidic Jewish Culture Jokes** & 1. Jewish Culture and 2. Yiddish words/expressions (close to significance) & 3. Composite Score: no significant correlation

→ Suggests that familiarity with Yiddish words/expressions may outweigh familiarity with Hasidic Jewish culture

→ Importance of linguistic cues, even if limited to lexical knowledge

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Limitations

- A deeper analysis of feedback that participants provided after each joke (as to what they found jokes funny or not) : more insights

→ as to why certain participants understood jokes

→ how their comprehension interacts with their rating various jokes differently.

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Acknowledgments

- Thanks to the participants

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