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‘No Peer Pressure’:
analysis of verbal humour in age-related English jokes

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of BA in English
Philology

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2016

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Abstract

Population ageing presents challenges to society; therefore, ageing has been a topic of humour for a long time. The present paper focuses on age representations in one-line and narrative jokes. The aim of the paper is to investigate the construction of age-related humour by identifying general patterns of the six Knowledge Resources (KRs) as well as examining the most prominent Logical Mechanisms (LMs). The paper also aims to shed some light on the attitudes towards elderly people expressed via age-related humour. The data consist of 155 one-line jokes and 100 narrative jokes in English. The analysis is based on the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH). The results suggest that the majority of the analysed one-line jokes tend to be associated with the lifestyle, health or age itself. The analysis of the narrative jokes revealed that the most prominent LMs in age-related humour were garden-path, reasoning from false premise, ignoring the obvious, pun, almost situations and exaggeration, whereas the attitude expressed towards the elderly people was more positive rather than negative.

1. Introduction

Humour has been chosen as an object of study by many scholars, while the genre of canned joke is ‘generally considered to be one of the prototypical manifestations of humour’ (Dyner 2012: 6). According to Attardo (1994), a significant amount of attention has been paid to jokes starting with philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and ending with Freud and Bergson. Contemporary scholars appreciate jokes by referring to them as a ‘form of poetry (...) which is accessible to anyone who understands the language and the culture’ (Chiaro 1992: 123), thus jokes can even be regarded as everyday masterpieces (ibid.). Moreover, it is also claimed that even a simple joke can utilise ‘language skills, theory-of-mind, symbolism, abstract thinking, and social perception, which leads to the conclusion that humor may arguably be humankind’s most complex cognitive attribute’ (Polimeni & Reiss 2006: 348).

The joke is preeminently a social phenomenon (Kuipers 2015: 6), and people often create jokes in order to express their attitudes, either positive or negative, to what is happening around them. Population ageing presents certain challenges to society, therefore, not surprisingly, ageing has been a topic of humour for a long time. A prominent phenomenon, namely *ageism* which in a nutshell is stereotyping and discriminating against individuals or groups on the basis of their age, has become an important aspect of both psychological and linguistic research. Andrews (1999: 11) claims that ‘what sets ageism apart from sexism and racism is its potent element of self-hatred’. It is widely known that generalisations which take on a negative connotation are referred to as prejudices (Linberts & June 2006: 83). The authors suggest that ‘ageism, like sexism and racism, is the prejudice behaviour of a society against older adults or negative stereotyping’ (Hoyer & Roodin 2003: 39 quoted in Linberts & June 2006: 83). Old age, ageing and a more specific term *ageism* have been widely used in recent years among the scholars in psychology, sociology and linguistics (Andrews 1999; Linberts & June 2006; Nelson 2011; Andrew 2012). Andrews suggests that there is a principle of disparity between body and soul and the distance between the two only grows due to time which still may be considered to be prevalent (Andrews 1999: 18). As a matter of fact, this principle forces a person to become afraid of getting old, simultaneously a negative judgement of the person and of society towards the elderly arises.

From the previous research, it appears that there are different viewpoints towards humour, for example, Norrick and Chiaro (2009: 17) argue that ‘humor enables people to interact more smoothly and to accomplish goals difficult or impossible to reach otherwise’. In social

conduct, humour helps to lighten the conversation and build a mutual trust, to reduce person's concerns and gain more objective perspective and to downplay an unintentional and potentially embarrassing self-revelation (Ervin-Tripp & Lampert 2009). In order to fully appreciate humour, however, it is important to value the speaker's intention of being jocular, and to bear in mind that 'the speaker is not necessarily referring to genuine situations, feelings, beliefs, etc.' (Dyner 2008b: 171), which may cause some difficulties. Nevertheless, there is also a different position in the previous research, namely, that humour serves as a negative social construct, for example:

When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that that will never happen to us - when that happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to (de Beauvoir 1970 quoted in Andrews 1999: 4).

Interestingly, the quote mentioned above may demonstrate that the fear of aging is not only transparent in psychological, sociological and linguistic research, but is also present among the philosophers (such as de Beauvoir quoted above). When people reject the category of old age for themselves, they are not necessarily denying the importance of age in their self-perceptions as much as they are distancing themselves from a stultifying stereotype (Andrews 1999: 23). Moreover, some scholars claim that by being ageist, people in fact try to fight against themselves in the future (Andrews 1999; Nelson 2011). Another point is that there is a particular cycle that continues in any generation: 'the young are divided from the old, and the old are divided within themselves, pitting body and soul against each other as if they were not part of one whole' (Andrews 1999: 29).

Thus, after taking into consideration the previous research done by other scholars, it can be claimed that the two foremost positions regarding the process of ageing and humour are the following: ageing is a natural process and humour helps people to make fun of themselves and in that way to avoid the possible fear of getting old, in other words, that humour is a positive social construct (Polimeni & Reiss 2006; Ervin-Tripp & Lampert 2009; Norrick & Chiaro 2009; Andrew 2012). Another position is that humour serves as a shield against old people in order to estrange oneself from the elderly and hope to be forever young or, as a negative social construct (Andrews 1999; Linberts & June 2006; Kuipers 2008; Nelson 2011).

Andrew (2012) has focused on the understanding of ageist humour from a sociolinguistic perspective and noted that old people often tend to joke about themselves and that such self-disparagement in ageist humour helps the elderly to deal with the negative side of being old. A few themes that seem to be prevalent in the age-related humour such as loss of physical

abilities, loss of attractiveness, ineptitude, etc. were proposed by the author as well, suggesting that age-related humour can be classified according to the prevalent themes or perhaps situations.

In order to analyse what kind of attitude the society expresses towards the elderly via humour, a quite divergent and controversial study proposed by Nelson (2011) was of particular importance, since the author explored the previous research on ageism. When people were asked about their attitudes towards ‘older people’, usually the image that was evoked was a negative stereotype about an older, usually unknown person. However, when one was asked to evaluate a specific older person, for example, his or her grandmother, fewer examples of old-age-related stereotypes came to a person’s mind, thus the attitude was much more likely to be positive. The author also introduced a significant *Terror management theory* which claims that ‘the anxiety and fear that are associated with death lead young people to blame the elderly for their plight – getting older’ (Nelson 2011: 40).

Since the methodology of this BA thesis will be based on Attardo’s (1991; 1994; 2002; 2011) and Raskin’s (1944; 1991; 2008) theoretical frameworks, it is necessary to reflect upon the major studies of these authors. The study of verbal humour in age-related English jokes is based on the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) which was established on the basis of the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), first outlined by Victor Raskin (1979). The revised version of the SSTH is called the GTVH to emphasise the fact that it is supposed to account, in principle, for any type of humorous text (Attardo 1994). The main hypothesis of the SSTH is that a text can be characterised as ‘a single-joke-carrying-text’ if the following conditions are satisfied: ‘the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts’ and ‘the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite’ (Raskin 1985: 99). Since its inception, the SSTH has been applied to various languages and cultures, always proving useful, thus reinforcing its universalist attitude, i.e., that the mechanisms of humour are universal and transcultural (Attardo 1994). This theory turned out to be very useful in achieving the aims of the present study as well.

Futhermore, the authors have devoted particular attention to the scripts as their opposition is one of the key principles in humour, thus in this BA thesis, the analysis of script opposition (SO) and logical mechanisms (LMs) in the narrative jokes was for the most part based on the studies and methodology proposed by Attardo and Raskin. Attardo et al. (2002: 6) have also shed some light on the logical mechanisms that were used in the present study to classify the narrative jokes analysed, and the authors claimed that the most frequent logical mechanisms

(LMs) in cartoons are: 1) *differential-potency mapping* (of elements of one script onto those of another), 2) *substitution* (one element for another), and 3) *juxtaposition* (of two simultaneously presented scripts), thus it was interesting to examine what kind of LMs were the most prominent in the data of this particular study.

Several Dynel (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2012) studies were also of particular importance in the present analysis of the logical mechanisms, since the author has presented a more detailed study of the LMs and also provided some theoretical background and a few important terms that were used in this BA thesis. For example, in the case of one-line jokes the term *punchline* was substituted for the term *switch* as proposed by the author. What the punchline exactly does is, it triggers the switch from one script to the other by making the hearer backtrack what he or she already know and realise that a different interpretation was possible from the very beginning of the joke (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 308). However, despite the fact that Dynel devotes a lot of attention to the punchline of the joke, some scholars seem to believe otherwise and the author of this study of verbal humour in age-related English jokes adheres to the point of view stated below:

(...) *the assumption that laughter occurs at and only at the punch line of a joke, whereas observation of practically any real narrative joke performance illustrates listeners and tellers laughing at various times from the announcement of the joke to the punch line and on afterwards, as the participants comment on the joke text and the joke-telling performance* (Norrick & Chiaro 2009).

Dynel (2012: 6) furthermore suggests that there is a universal cognitive incongruity-resolution mechanism, *the garden-path*, where the incongruous punchline evokes a concealed sense of the preceding text, bringing to light its initially covert ambiguity. The author also claims that the workings of the garden-path mechanism can be more easily appreciated on the basis of one-liners (Dynel 2012: 12), which was of great importance for the present study since a fair amount of the jokes analysed were one-liners. Interestingly, Dynel (2012: 6), to the best of my knowledge, was the only one to claim that the garden-path mechanism has its own sub-categories, namely *the red-light joke* which ends with a surprising punchline which neither proves the set-up ambiguous nor invalidates any earlier inferences but brings unexpectedly incongruous piece of information, which is then rendered congruent with the first part of the text. Another sub-category is *the crossroads joke* whose distinguishing feature is that it is already the set-up that includes the focal incongruity, entailing incomprehensible premises which surpass absurdity typical of many jokes (Dynel 2012: 6). Dynel also refers to *the Incongruity-resolution (I-R) model* which was coined by Suls in 1972:

The hearer first recognises and then resolves incongruity according to an adequate cognitive rule which renders the incongruous element somehow congruent with the whole text (and/or non-verbal stimulus). Thereby, the hearer appreciates the emerging humour (Suls 1972 quoted in Dynel 2012: 7).

Suls (1972) also claims that the beginning and middle parts of a joke are generally congruent, and the middle usually follows from the beginning and suggests that it is only at the ending that one's expectations are abruptly disconfirmed.

Despite the fact that a fair amount of research has been done both on humour and ageism, little attention has been paid to humour, more precisely to one-line and narrative jokes, that were mainly concerned with age itself and the process of ageing. Thus, it is the purpose of the present research to investigate the construction of age-related humour in one-line and narrative jokes by identifying general patterns of the six Knowledge Resources (KRs) as well as examining the most prominent Logical Mechanisms (LMs). The paper also aims to shed some light on the attitudes towards the elderly expressed via age-related humour.

This section has been devoted to the review of the most prominent studies of humour, in particular the GTVH which was chosen as the methodology for the analysis of verbal humour in age-related English jokes. The following section will describe the data that were collected and the methods applied for the analysis of the age-related jokes, then the interpretation of the findings will be illustrated with relevant examples of the jokes that were analysed. Finally, conclusions about the construction patterns of age-related humour in English will be drawn and potential areas for further research will be indicated.

2. Data and methods

This section describes the process of data collection and the methods that were applied in the analysis of verbal humour in age-related English jokes. The data have been gathered using the Internet sources and this choice was determined by the fact that online sources provide a more direct, convenient access to up-to-date material for the analysis. Mintz (2008) suggests that the broad field of the Internet act as an interactive endeavour and that a great number of humorous activity there can be considered to be folklore. Since there are quite a few humorous websites, they may also be regarded as one of the major sources of popular humour today. The jokes were collected in the period of September – December, 2015. The websites such as *freemaninstitute.com*, *jokearchives.com*, *agehumor.com*, *readersdigest.com* and *sickipedia.com* were selected as the main sources of the one-line and narrative jokes (see p. 26 for the full list data sources). The websites from which the data were gathered were selected by entering the key words, such as *old*, *age*, *ageing* and *jokes* for narrative jokes and the pattern of “*you know you are getting old when...*” was chosen for the one-line jokes.

The selection of jokes was based on the following criteria: the jokes had to have the key words such as *old*, *age*, *elderly*, *grandmother*, *senior*, in other words, to be related to or to have any indication of old age. Secondly, the one-line jokes had to have the selected pattern in the beginning of the joke “*you know you are getting old when...*”. Lastly, the jokes that contained swear words or other obscene expressions as well as reoccurring ones were rejected. Apart from these criteria, all the jokes were chosen randomly, that is the jokes that appeared first in one particular website were chosen for the analysis until there were no more appropriate jokes, then the search was continued in another website. The first websites that appeared in the web search engine were chosen until the necessary number, i.e. 155 of the one-line jokes and 100 of narrative jokes, was collected.

The compiled corpus comprised 255 (155 one-liners and 100 narrative) jokes related to age and, concerning the exact size of the corpus, it consisted of a total of 7549 words (5726 words in the narrative jokes, while 1823 words were found in the one-line jokes, without taking the recurring pattern “*you know you are getting old when...*” into account). It is worth mentioning that the analysis of the one-line jokes is a separate analysis from the narrative jokes, since the main focus is on the major themes or situations that do prevail in the age-related one-line jokes based on the language of the joke. The main focus in the analysis of the narrative jokes,

however, is on the six Knowledge Resources (KRs) that are summarised below. The attitudes towards the elderly that are expressed via age-related English jokes will be examined on the basis of the analysis of both types of jokes as well.

The present study is based on the GTVH, which introduces six Knowledge Resources (KR), namely the script opposition (SO), the logical mechanism (LM), the target (TA), the narrative strategy (NS), the language (LA), and the situation (SI) that can be summarised as follows (see *Table 1* below):

Table 1. The summary of the Knowledge Resources (KR) (adapted from Attardo 1994)

SO	The parametre that all jokes must have, i.e. two opposite scripts that are in conflict.
LM	The parametre that accounts for the way in which the two scripts in the joke are brought together.
TA	The parametre that selects who is the “butt” of the joke, it contains the names of groups or individuals with humorous stereotypes attached to each.
NS	The form of narrative organisation, either as a simple (framed) narrative, as a dialogue i.e. question and answer, as a (pseudo-)riddle, as an aside in conversation, etc.
LA	All the information necessary for the verbalisation of a text.
SI	The parametre that can be thought of as the “props” of the joke, i.e. the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc.

Despite the fact that all KRs are observed in a joke, some of the six parametres, for example, LA or NS, are more tangible than others moving up on the scale presented below, which means that they can be examined more precisely. The analysis of other KRs, e.g. SO or LM, however, is mostly based on subjective interpretations and implications, thus the six Knowledge Resources may be presented in the following order (see *Table 2* below):

Table 2. Hierarchy of the six Knowledge Resources (Attardo 1994: 227)

SO
↓
LM
↓
SI
↓
TA
↓
NS
↓
LA

The study of verbal humour in age-related English jokes benefited from a list of all known logical mechanisms (see *Table 3* below), provided by Attardo et al. (2002) in one of his earlier

studies, as it suggested the possible LMs which were used in the analysis of the chosen data. Despite the fact that the list is quite comprehensive, only those LMs that were clearly defined by Attardo or Dynel were applied in the present analysis.

Table 3. List of all known LMs (Attardo et al. 2002: 18)

role-reversals	role exchanges	potency mappings
vacuous reversals	juxtaposition	Chiasmus
garden-path	figure-ground reversal	faulty reasoning
almost situations	analogy	self-undermining
inferring consequences	reasoning from false premise	missing link
coincidence	parallelism	implicit parallelism
proportion	ignoring the obvious	false analogy
exaggeration	field restriction	Cratylism/puns
meta-humor	vicious circle	referential ambiguity

In order for the analysis to be less subjective, the *triangulation method* was applied and I enquired a friend of mine Aivaras, who is also a fourth year student of English Philology at Vilnius University and has a similar level of English language proficiency, to verify the results of the analysis of the one-line and narrative jokes. The purpose of the triangulation method in the qualitative research was to increase the credibility and validity of the given results. By combining multiple observers, this study aimed at overcoming the weaknesses or intrinsic biases and the problems that may come from a single observer's interpretation. First of all, the second observer was introduced with the GTVH theory and the six KRs that were applied during the analysis of the jokes and was asked to look over the analysis that was already done by the author of the present study, also, to comment whether he is of the same opinion regarding the interpretations and KRs of the both types of jokes. Later on, the interpretations of the jokes were compared with the understanding of the second observer. The method turned out to be extremely useful for the analysis, especially while dealing with the possible LMs in the age-related narrative jokes and hidden interpretations that may be observed in a joke as well and could not be seen at first glance.

This section described what kind of data were used for the analysis of verbal humour in age-related English jokes and explained the methodology that was applied while analysing the selected jokes. In the following section, the results of this study will be discussed.

3. Results and discussion

In this part of the present paper, major tendencies of the one-line jokes together with the analysis of the narrative jokes based on the KRs are discussed. In section 4.1, particular attention is paid to the one-line jokes, while in section 4.2, the narrative jokes are discussed in greater depth. Section 4.3 provides the general discussion based on the results of the analysis of verbal humour in age-related English jokes. The discussion of results is illustrated by examples from Appendices A and B which contain the analyses of all one-line and narrative jokes (Appendices A and B are provided in a CD attached to the BA paper).

3.1. The one-line jokes

The analysis of the one-line jokes revealed that certain themes prevail among the jokes (see *Table 4* below). For the purpose of the present study, the term “theme” represents the situation (SI) of the one-line joke analysed, referring to the central and perhaps the paramount element in the joke, rather than describing the whole situation of every joke.

Table 4. The themes of the age-related one-line jokes*

Type of theme	Number of instances	Percentage
Appearance	9	5.8%
Health	26	16.8%
Lack of energy	12	7.7%
Lifestyle	48	31.0%
Lifetime	33	21.3%
Memory	16	10.3%
Nostalgia	4	2.6%
Wisdom	7	4.5%
Total:	155	100%

*the most prominent themes are written in bold.

It appears that the most prominent theme in the one-line jokes is that of the *lifestyle*, which accounts for almost one third (31%) of the one-line jokes. Yet, it should be noted that “lifestyle” is rather a broad term and since no other specific themes may have been associated with these particular jokes, they were assigned to this theme, for example (the number in square brackets indicates the place of the joke in the analysis that is provided in a CD together with appendices, these numbers are used throughout this BA thesis):

You know you are getting old when...

(1) *watching paint dry has a certain fascination.* [126]

(2) *you take a metal detector to the beach.* [146]

The first joke indicates that if a person enjoys, in this case, to watch how the paint is drying, he or she probably has much more leisure time than they know what to do with, i.e. they are probably retired. The SI of the second example suggests that usually much older people go to the beach to search for “long lost treasures” and are willing to take a metal detector with them and, in both examples these features can be linked to the person’s lifestyle, bearing in mind that the target is usually an ordinary or lay person and not a professional artist or treasure hunter.

The quantitative analysis suggests that the second most popular theme is the *lifetime* which is not surprising as the analysed jokes are supposed to be age-related, which implies, about the elderly. Overall, 33 instances of a direct reference to age in the joke were found which results in 21.3% of all the one-line jokes. Consider the following examples:

You know you are getting old when...

(3) *you are often asked to give a personal account of the story of creation.* [47]

(4) *your favourite part of the newspaper is “20 Years Ago Today”* [55]

From the situation of the jokes presented above, it appears that if people are asking about the story of the creation or even want one’s personal account of how things have happened and, if a person looks forward to reading the newspaper that is about the past rather than present, it is most likely that the person is really old and the only question is how old he or she is.

Another common theme among the one-line jokes is *health*, more specifically health issues or as people might call it “the lost youth”, which resulted in 16.8% of all the jokes analysed. It is worth mentioning that even though the *lack of energy* theme may fall under the *health* theme, it was treated as a separate one because it appeared to be a prevalent among the jokes analysed as well. More specifically, 12 instances were found of this kind of jokes, and there was the possibility of specifying the situation of these jokes, that is, they were not only related to the health, but also to the lack of energy, e.g.:

You know you are getting old when...

(5) *your back goes out more than you do.* [69]

(6) *it takes two tries to get up from the couch.* [85]

In example (5) there is a nice wordplay *your back goes out* which implies that either the person goes for a walk or to a café, or that his or her back is not straight, which indicates a health issue. Both of the examples above suggest that having trouble with the back and not being able to get up from the couch in one attempt is an indication of a bad health. What is more, in joke (6), it appears that the person probably does not have enough strength or energy to do what one wants with his or her tired body, thus there is a hint of lack of energy as well.

The remaining themes i.e. *memory*, *appearance*, *wisdom* and *nostalgia* are not as statistically significant. The first three are still typical among age-related one-line jokes since there were 7 or more instances found of each of the theme, while the last one, *nostalgia*, may be treated as marginal or perhaps accidental case in the one-line jokes analysed as it resulted in less than 3% of all the cases.

The second step for the analysis of one-line jokes was to focus on the LA of the one-liners and to examine whether there are any interesting implications about old age that are used to describe it. The analysis of the language of the age-related one-line jokes suggests that there are certain phrases or perhaps hints which may be used in order to refer to the age of the target of the joke, for example:

You know you are getting old when...

(7) *you realise your metabolism is not what it used to be.* [22]

(8) *people tell you how good you look.* [57]

The phrases *not what it used to be* and *how good you look* may be treated as inferences of old age. In example (7), this understatement can be considered as a feature of the elderly as old people are the ones who tend to compare things from the past with those of the present due to the time spent living and the gathered knowledge of the world, and it is not an exception with the general health or condition of their own bodies. Example (8) may imply that if the people that a person meets do not forget to mention how good he or she looks, it is likely that the person has reached the point in his or her life when they can be called good-looking *for their age*, i.e. “well-preserved”. There is a tendency in the society to use this kind of expressions in order to avoid offending the old person.

The one-liners also indicate the tendency of being rather “poetic” or witty because of the common use of the wordplays, e.g.:

You know you are getting old when...

(9) *your knees buckle, and your belt won't.*[67]

(10) *your mind makes contracts your body can't meet.* [103]

The word *buckle* in example (9) implies that not only the belt can be buckled, but also person's knees may buckle as well, that is if they are out of shape or weak, which is not preferred by the person. In this case, however, the old person is not able to fasten his or her belt which is usually something that a person prefers to do and the whole phrase is a wordplay of this opposition. In example (10), a metaphor may be observed where mind is treated as a person and the reader basically infers that the elderly tend to believe that they are still young and are able to perform or do anything what comes to their mind, despite the fact that their bodies are indicating otherwise.

3.2. The narrative jokes

In this part, the results of the analysis of the age-related narrative jokes will be presented. The discussion is subdivided according to the KRs which are examined in greater depth separately and illustrated with relevant examples of the jokes analysed. The four KRs, namely the script opposition (SO), logical mechanism (LM), target (TA) and narrative strategy (NS) are discussed by taking into account the language used in the jokes (LA) and the situation within the joke (SI).

3.2.1. The script opposition (SO)

In order to deal with the first knowledge resource SO, it is necessary to, first of all, discuss the types of oppositeness that were found in the narrative jokes analysed (see *Table 5* below):

Table 5. Types of oppositeness in the age-related narrative jokes*

Type of oppositeness	Number of instances	Percentage
Ability/Inability	36	36%
Actual/Non-actual	3	3%
Good/Bad	18	18%
Life/Death	17	17%
Money/No-money	3	3%
Possible/Impossible	23	23%
Total:	100	100%

*the prevalent types are written in bold

The results reveal that the prevalent type of oppositeness is *Ability/Inability* as 36% of the jokes could be assigned to this particular oppositeness. In this type of opposition the target is

usually unable to do something or perform some kind of task due to his or her physical condition that may be closely linked to the age of the target, for example:

(11) *Retirement is the best thing that has happened to my brother-in-law. "I never know what day of the week it is," he gloated. "All I know is, the day the big paper comes, I have to dress up and go to church."* [3]

(12) *Why is it that pensioners can remember an entire war and yet are unable to remember four digits at a chip and pin machine.* [35]

The examples above are related to an old person's memory, since in example (11) the target is unable to tell apart the days of the week and he could not care less about that, while in example (12), there is an opposition between the short-term and long-term memory, in other words, inability to remember daily things in contrast with a clear recalling of events from the past.

The second most common type of oppositeness is *Possible/Impossible* which generally deals with strange situations that may have happened to the target of the joke and sometimes it is hard to believe whether the situations are real or not, e.g.:

(13) *A young man asked an old rich man how he made his money. The old guy fingered his worsted wool vest and said, "well, son, it was 1932. The depth of the great depression. I was down to my last nickel." "I invested that nickel in an apple. I spent the entire day polishing the apple and, at the end of the day, I sold the apple for ten cents." "The next morning, I invested those ten cents in two apples. I spent the entire day polishing them and sold them at 5:00 pm for 20 cents. I continued this system for a month, by the end of which I'd accumulated a fortune of \$1.37." "Then my wife's father died and left us two million dollars."* [75]

In this joke, at first it is suggested that hard work pays off, yet at the end of the joke it turns out that it is impossible that the old man became rich only by selling apples and, actually, that he received an inheritance from his father-in-law and only then he became rich. Thus, throughout the narrative the SI is believed to be possible and only in the punchline the story turns out to be impossible and the real circumstances are revealed.

Interestingly, the findings of the present study, to a certain extent, correlate with the results proposed by Raskin (1985: 113-114; 127): 'The script oppositions fall into these three classes: actual vs. non-actual, normal vs. abnormal, and possible vs. impossible. The most common oppositions are: good/bad, life/death, obscene/non-obscene, money/no-money, and high/low stature'. Most of these oppositions are quite typical for the narrative jokes on ageing as well (see Table 5 above). The distinction between the types of oppositeness, and the fact that one joke may be assigned to a certain type, in later analysis helped to narrow down the possible

types of SOs that were prevalent in the age-related narrative jokes. Thus, only after dealing with these types of oppositeness, it is possible to move on to the first KR, that is, the script opposition. For example, in (11) when the type of oppositeness is assigned, which is *Ability/Inability*, then the SO can be distinguished as well, which in this joke is RETIREMENT vs. VACATION.

It is the punchline of the joke that generally assists in distinguishing types of the scripts that do exist in a joke. Raskin in his earlier study (1985: 114-117) distinguishes between two kinds of semantic script-switch triggers within the punchline, namely those that are based on an ambiguity and, the second type which are based on a contradiction (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 299), which can be observed by analysing LA and SI KRs within the joke. In this stage of the analysis, however, another problem arises because sometimes, while interpreting the joke, it is difficult to decide upon which of the scripts are opposed when more than two scripts are present. Thus, it appears that ‘some notion of a dominant or central script within each of the two interpretations’ is required (Ritchie 2004: 73). It also turns out that the number of oppositions exhibited by jokes is finite and limited and since the inception of SSTH it has become clearer that ‘the oppositions of the lowest level are not equal in generality’ (Attardo & Raskin 1991: 308) and the present analysis has faced this problem as well. Nevertheless, the analysis of SO distinguished the most frequent types of the scripts (one from the pair) that are opposed in the age-related narrative jokes: *memory (loss)*, *long (happy) life*, *marriage*, *youth*, *death*, *health* and *being old*, for example:

(14) *Well, I've finally reached the wonder years... **Wonder where my car is parked? Wonder where I left my phone? Wonder where my glasses are? Wonder what day it is?*** [46]

(15) *A reporter was interviewing a 104 year-old woman: “And what do you think is the best thing about being 104?” the reporter asked. She replied: “**No peer pressure.**”* [1]

Example (14) indicates the loss of memory in opposition to the best years in any person's life. The word *wonder* is ambiguous and may indicate a period of time in a person's life when everything is in a place and best things happen (*wonder years*) and also the action when a person is trying to remember or figure something out or doubts about something. In joke (15), however, long and happy life is opposed to death since the old woman claims that the best thing about being really old is that all the people of the same age have already passed away. The punchline (written in bold) may refer to the influence of observers that encourages others to change their attitudes values, or behaviours to conform to those of the influencing group or individual and, also the pressure from the people of the same age. Despite several explicit

cases, however, it is still hard to distinguish between the most common pairs of opposite scripts since there were almost no pairs of scripts that have reoccurred more than once among the age-related narrative jokes.

3.2.2. The logical mechanism (LM)

Some scholars suggest that the ‘sudden narrative shift alone is not a sufficient condition for humour’ and that ‘the nature of the relationship between narratives is of paramount importance’ (Partington 2006: 226). That is why LM KR is one of the most important among the six and the main function of this parameter is to provide the logical justification for the conflict between the two opposite scripts that are present in the joke. It is worth noting that the analysis of the LMs was rather challenging due to the fact that the dominant or central LM of a joke was difficult to recognise. Thus, the opinion of my colleague was taken into account in order to decide upon which of the LMs was the dominant one and which allowed to distinguish between the most common logical mechanisms in a more objective way (see *Table 6* below):

Table 6. The most common LMs among the age-related narrative jokes

Type of logical mechanism	Number of instances	Percentage
Garden-path	26	26%
Reasoning from false premise	22	22%
Ignoring the obvious	11	11%
Cratylism/Pun	9	9%
Almost situation	5	5%
Exaggeration	5	5%
Analogy	4	4%
False analogy	3	3%
Juxtaposition	3	3%
Self-undermining	3	3%

Only those LMs that appeared three times or more, i.e. those which could be assigned to at least three jokes during the analysis, were considered to be among the most common ones (the full list of the LMs assigned is provided in Appendix C. Table 6.).

The analysis of the age-related narrative jokes revealed that the *garden-path* LM is the most common one since it was assigned to 26% of all the jokes. Consider the following example (16):

(16) *Two elderly ladies meet at the launderette after not seeing one another for some time. After inquiring about each other's health one asked how the other's husband was doing. "Oh! Ted died last week. He went out to the garden to dig up a cabbage for dinner, had a heart attack and dropped down dead right there in the middle of the vegetable patch!" "Oh dear! I'm very sorry." replied her friend "What did you do?" "Opened a can of peas instead"* [79]

(17) *Her class assignment was to interview an "old person" about his life, so my niece asked me "What was the biggest historical event that happened during your childhood?" "I'd have to say the moonwalk", I replied. She looked disappointed. "That dance was so important to you?"* [51]

The humorous effect in joke (16) presented above is clearly achieved only in the punchline of the joke. The old lady who is now a widow describes to her friend how her husband passed away, yet the emphasis is put not on the death of her beloved husband, but on the dinner choices she had to make instead, which is rather unexpected and incongruous with the rest of the narrative. Moving on to example (17), the *reasoning from false premise* LM is used and it appeared to be the second most prevalent LM among the narrative jokes analysed. The humorous effect is achieved through the polysemous word *moonwalk* since it refers to the first steps of humanity on the moon in 1969 and also to the dance move which was popularised by Michael Jackson in 1983. The niece is left in confusion as she believes that the dance move was the most important historical event during her aunt's childhood and that is why the joke "works".

During the analysis of the narrative jokes, however, there were some jokes that were rather ambiguous, thus it was difficult to decide upon which of the possible LMs is the dominant one, for example:

(18) *One big ship suddenly falls in danger in mid sea and sea water entered in to the ship. Everybody was running fast here and there. A young couple have seen that one very old lady is also running but she has picked up her skirt up to her heap. So they told the old lady "Granny, why did you lift up your skirt, please put it down." The old lady told "Oh no, my 85 years old body people can see no problem but my costly skirt I cannot let it be destroyed."* [77]

There are two possible LMs in this case, namely *ignoring the obvious* and *self-undermining*. The joke above was assigned with the *ignoring the obvious* logical mechanism due to the fact that the old lady is desperate to save her costly skirt, despite the fact that if she does not survive the shipwreck, so does her precious skirt. There is also a strong signification of self-undermining in the punchline as well since the old lady shows no worries about the possible death or at least a serious injury during the danger, yet it was not treated as the dominant logical justification in the conflict between the opposite scripts.

It is important to understand, however, that there are always certain incongruities in any joke that are not exploited for the joke at all and we disregard them like ‘the many non-humorous incongruities that we overlook in works of fiction for the sake of “suspension of disbelief”’ (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011: 131), e.g.:

(19) *Yesterday I went to the doctor for my yearly physical. My blood pressure was high, my cholesterol was high, I'd gained some weight, and I didn't feel so hot. My doctor said eating right doesn't have to be complicated and it would solve my physical problems. He said just think in colours; fill your plate with bright colours; greens, yellows, reds, etc. I went right home and ate an entire bowl of M&M's and, sure enough, I felt better immediately. I never knew eating right could be so easy...* [84]

In example (19) the phrase *He said just think in colours; fill your plate with bright colours; greens, yellows, reds, etc.* gives rise to incongruity in understanding what a healthy diet actually entails. The humorous effect is achieved because the old person misinterprets the doctor's orders to start on a healthy diet, yet the fact that the doctor probably continued with his suggestion and explained to the patient what healthy nutrition entails and specified whether to eat or not a certain kind of products, all this is disregarded in this example for the sake of the joke. In fact, the incongruities may be resolved through the logical mechanisms and the ‘pleasure arises along with the resolution of the incongruities and with the release of tension built up during the preceding intellectual effort’ (Wu 2013: 52). It turns out that adults do enjoy these intellectual and linguistic challenges due to their liberating and defying potential (Ermida 2008: 81). ‘Engaging in language games and successfully solving the interpretive problems they present provides one with a sense of victory, freedom and self-confidence’ (ibid.).

The KR of logical mechanism was also one of the most difficult parts of the present study to deal with as the LMs lack clear-cut definitions and explicit examples provided by scholars. Moreover, some LMs do overlap and may even refer to the same phenomenon, only in different words, e.g.: *reasoning from false premise* and *faulty reasoning* (the first notion was chosen for this BA thesis). Ritchie (2004: 80) in his earlier study, seems to have shared a similar point of view and claimed that ‘the basic concepts, particularly the central mechanisms of scripts, script opposition, and logical mechanism, are so ill-defined (...) that the theory has very little substance’.

Nevertheless, there are some quite self-explanatory LMs, for example *ignoring the obvious*, *coincidence* or *exaggeration*. The *garden-path* LM despite being the most common one in the present analysis of the narrative jokes, is among those which have caused the most trouble,

because it seems to involve the audience being led to expect one interpretation whereas another one is suddenly revealed as the correct reading occurs (Attardo and Raskin 1991). This, in fact, might be very puzzling, as ‘the SSTH seems to analyse *all* jokes as garden-paths’, in the sense that in every joke there is a “hidden” interpretation of the text which is suddenly revealed at the end of it (Ritchie 2004: 75). This interpretation may lead to believe that the distinction between LMs is a rather vague one and the GTVH theory itself requires some clarification.

3.2.3. The target (TA) and narrative strategy (NS)

In contrast with other KRs, the TA and NS parameters are much more tangible since the target and the narrative strategy can be classified in a rather precise manner. The target in the narrative jokes that are dealing with ageing is, naturally, an old man or a woman, sometimes more than one person is the target and, in some cases, the joke is targeted to the elderly in general without any specification of gender, e.g.:

(20) *I did some stand-up at an old people’s home last week. Tough crowd. **They wouldn’t even answer my knock-knock until I showed some ID.*** [36]

The joke (20) above cannot be linked to one particular person since it describes a situation that may be common to the elderly as such. The choice of the target, however, is not completely free as one may believe from the start. In fact, only someone for whom stupid or deviant behaviour is believed to be natural and requires no specific explanation can be considered to be the target of a joke (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 301). In other words, the suitable target must have the ‘dumb’ stereotype associated with it and, it is worthwhile noting that ‘the stereotype of dumbness should be associated with the targeted group totally independently of whether it corresponds to reality’ or not (ibid.). It is also important to bear in mind that the target parameter is, as a matter of fact, optional for a joke and it is the only optional knowledge resource among the six (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 302).

Dealing with the KR of the narrative strategy was not as challenging as with the other parts of the present analysis since it is responsible for the narrative organisation of a joke and there were only five possible narrative strategies that were used in the narrative jokes analysed (see *Table 7* below):

Table 7. The narrative strategies (NS) of the age-related narrative jokes*

Type of strategy	Number of instances	Percentage
Expository + Dialogue-type	57	57%

Expository	25	25%
Dialogue-type	11	11%
Question-answer	5	5%
Poem	2	2%
Total:	100	100%

*The dominant narrative strategy is written in bold

The quantitative analysis suggests that *the expository* type combined with *the dialogue* is the dominant type of all the narrative strategies since it was identified in 57% of the jokes analysed. Consider the following example:

(21) *An old man is sitting on a park bench crying. A young man is walking by and asks him why he's crying. The old man says, "I'm retired and I have lots of money, a huge luxury apartment, a beautiful 25 year old wife who loves me and has sex with me twice a day" The young man says, "Well then why the hell are you crying!?" The old man replies, "**I can't remember where I live!**"* [41]

The expository type appeared to be quite common among the age-related narrative jokes as well since 25 instances of this kind of strategy were found. The *question-answer* type together with the so-called *poem* type, however, may be considered to be marginal because only seven cases of both types were found (see *Table 7* above), hence the occurrences were treated as statistically insignificant.

3.3. General discussion

The results suggest that the majority of the analysed one-line jokes tend to be associated with the lifestyle of the elderly, health or age itself. Interestingly, the one-liners occasionally made use of various word plays in order to avoid being offensive and have rather interesting implications about the age of the target as well. A few themes that were introduced in the study about the ageist humour by Andrew (2012: 14-19) such as loss of physical and mental abilities, ineptitude, loss of attractiveness, etc. were also prevalent in the present study, thus there are certain correspondences with the sociolinguistic perspective proposed by Andrew (2012) (see p. 5-6).

As it was mentioned in the introduction of the present study, one of the minor objectives that appeared while doing the review of previous research on humour was to compare the findings of Attardo et al. (2002: 6) study, that is, the most frequent LMs in cartoons and the findings of the present study. It turns out that the most common LMs in cartoons and in the narrative jokes about ageing do not correspond, since the only logical mechanism that appeared in both

studies is *juxtaposition* and there were only three cases found among the narrative jokes. Thus it cannot be treated as frequent type in this particular study. The analysis of the age-related narrative jokes revealed that the most prominent LMs in this type of humour are garden-path, reasoning from false premise or faulty reasoning, ignoring the obvious, puns, almost situations and exaggeration, most of which can be related to the traits that the old people generally seem to share, for example forgetfulness, confusion, etc.

The most intriguing aim of the study was to analyse what kind of attitude towards elderly people society expresses via age-related humour. What may come as a surprise is that even though the narrative jokes are about ageing and their target is the elderly, i.e. their main purpose is to mock the elderly, despite that the mocking might be in a good way, the results of this study demonstrate that the attitude of the society towards the elderly people is more positive, rather than negative, which is a rather significant finding of the study. The majority of the narrative jokes are positive or in some cases neutral and that resulted in 62% of all the jokes analysed (see Appendix C. Table 8. for the overall results of the attitude expressed) and it is also the case with the one-liners. Thus, it appears that ageing is a natural process and humour helps people to make fun of themselves and in that way to avoid the possible fear of getting old or, in other words, that humour is a positive social construct, concurring with the findings presented by other scholars (Polimeni & Reiss 2006; Ervin-Tripp & Lampert 2009; Norrick & Chiaro 2009; Andrew 2012).

4. Conclusions

The following section draws some conclusions and indicates the limitations of the present study. Suggestions and recommendations for further research are also provided at the end of the section.

The major findings of the present study of verbal humour in age-related English jokes suggest that the majority of the analysed one-line jokes tended to be associated with the lifestyle, health or age itself of the elderly. The analysis of the narrative jokes revealed that the most prominent logical mechanisms in age-related humour were garden-path, reasoning from false premise, ignoring the obvious, pun, almost situations and exaggeration. Interestingly, the attitude expressed towards the elderly people was more likely to be positive rather than negative since the targets of the narrative jokes were often the people that the narrators of the joke are usually familiar with, i.e. family members, neighbours, close friends, etc., which corresponds with the findings presented by other authors (see p. 6).

Nevertheless, Dynel (2008a: 1) claims that it is next to impossible to demonstrate a coherent and exhaustive picture of ‘the state-of-the-art research on humour, in as much as this is a greatly diversified field, comprising a wide spectrum of disciplines (...) and innumerable approaches within which all manner of humour’s manifestations and humour-related phenomena may be studied’ and age-related humour is not an exception. Thus, it should be taken into account that the present study is not intended to be exhaustive and is limited in scope, which means that the results may not correspond to other corpora, that is, jokes selected by other authors or from other sources. It seems that further research is required to draw some general conclusions regarding age-related jokes and humour in general, which may be applicable to, for example, a greater number of languages or at least more genres.

Moreover, it would be interesting to extend the analysis of age-related humour by looking at children’s and perhaps teenagers’ humour and to examine what people tend to joke about when they are young. A thorough investigation of the previous research on humour may also be required to analyse the material of the present analysis in greater depth or, different chosen data may suggest other results that are quite different from those of this particular study of verbal humour in age-related English jokes. Hence, given the importance of challenges that the ageing society is facing and that humour has become a more important aspect of everyday

life and the present lack of this kind of research, it appears that there may be a pressing need for broader cross-genre and cross-linguistic studies to be pursued by other researchers.

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7. Summary in Lithuanian

Populiacijos senėjimas kelia vis naujus iššūkius visuomenei, būtent dėl to senėjimo tema tapo populiari humore. Šiame darbe pagrindinis dėmesys yra skiriamas amžiui analizuoti vienos eilutės bei pasakojimo anekdotuose. Tyrimo tikslai: bandant identifikuoti šešių „Žinojimo Šaltinių“ (KRs) pasikartojančius modelius, ištirti kaip konstruojamas su amžiumi susijęs humoras ir apžvelgti dažniausiai pasikartojančius loginius mechanizmus (LMs). Taip pat, šis darbas siekia bent iš dalies panagrinėti, kokį požiūrį į senyvo amžiaus žmones visuomenė atskleidžia naudodama su amžiumi susijusį humorą. Tiriamoji medžiaga susideda iš 155 vienos eilutės ir 100 pasakojimo anekdotų anglų kalba. Šio darbo analizė yra paremta „Bendra kalbinio humoro teorija“ (GTVH).

Apžvelgus gautus tyrimo rezultatus galima teigti, kad daugumai analizuotų vienos eilutės anekdotų yra būdinga apibūdinti senyvo amžiaus žmonių gyvenimo būdą, sveikatą ir jų amžių. Pagal pasakojamųjų anekdotų analizės rezultatus galima daryti išvadą, kad populiariausi loginiai mechanizmai humore apie senėjimą yra: „sodo-takas“ (*garden-path*), samprotavimas pagal klaidingą prielaidą, ignoravimas to, kas akivaizdu, kalambūrai, „beveik“ situacijos (*almost situations*) ir perdėjimas, tuo tarpu visuomenės požiūris į senyvo amžiaus žmones yra labiau teigiamas nei neigiamas. Taigi, turint omenyje iššūkius, su kuriais susiduria senėjanti visuomenė ir tai, kad humoras tampa vis svarbesniu kasdieninio gyvenimo aspektu bei esant tokio pobūdžio tyrimų trūkumui, galima daryti prielaidą, kad egzistuoja stiprus poreikis tolimesniems tyrimams apimantiems ne tik kelis žanrus, bet ir keletą kalbų. Taip pat, būtų įdomu plačiau panagrinėti humorą susijusį su amžiumi ir aptarti vaikų, o galbūt ir paauglių humorą, paanalizuoti, apie ką linkę juokauti jauni žmonės.

8. Appendix

Appendix C

Table 6. The full list of LMs assigned to the narrative jokes

Type of LM	Number of instances	Percentage
Garden-path	26	26%
Reasoning from false premise	22	22%
Ignoring the obvious	11	11%
Cratylism/Pun	9	9%
Almost situation	5	5%
Exaggeration	5	5%
Analogy	4	4%
False analogy	3	3%
Juxtaposition	3	3%
Self-undermining	3	3%
Meta-humour	2	2%
Proportion	2	2%
Coincidence	1	1%
Figure-ground reversal	1	1%
Missing link	1	1%
Referential ambiguity	1	1%
Role exchange/reversal	1	1%

Table 8. The attitude of society towards the elderly people in the narrative jokes

Type of attitude	Number of instances	Percentage
Positive/neutral	62	62%
Negative	38	38%