

## Humor Research in Bulgaria: Past, Present and Future

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**Abstract:** The goal of the paper is a critical analysis of humor research in Bulgaria in the fields of psychology, aesthetics, folklore studies, linguistics, journalism and media communication. Lack of unified terminology in humor research in Bulgaria and elsewhere is justified by the fact that humor is a complex phenomenon and how we define it depends on the perspective we take. Several scholars focus on the joke as a fundamental unit of humor. Folklore studies focus on the importance of the joke in the construction of man's representation of himself; linguistic research on how the joke text is structured or how it develops to facilitate the introduction of an incongruity and the techniques employed for its (partial) resolution or, in other words, how humor becomes an aspect of the joke text. Other studies take a cross-cultural perspective on humor, comparing German-Bulgarian and English-Bulgarian joke culture and humor translatability. Research on humor in the print media pays attention to the social functions of humor and the role humorous and satirical newspapers and magazines play in its dissemination.

**Keywords:** humor, German-Bulgarian and English-Bulgarian humor studies, humor and the print media.

### 1. Introduction

When one takes a look at humor research in Bulgaria, he/she is left with the impression that no unified terminology is followed, which, in fact, is the case with researchers of humor in other countries, although to a lesser degree. A number of Bulgarian researchers use *the comic* interchangeably with *the laughable* (смешното) in the sense of *humorous* or *funny*. For other Bulgarian researchers *the comic* is the narrower term pertaining to comedy as a dramatic genre. In its latter sense, *the comic* is analyzed as an aesthetic category in opposition to *the tragic*. The tragic and the comic, as aesthetic categories, pertain to art and refer to the mode the creator of art perceives the world; adopting the comic mode, he/she exposes the insignificances and trivialities in the world. Isaac Passy (1993) and Ana Dimova (2006) use *the comic* as a wider notion than *the laughable*: for Passy and Dimova *the comic* consists of what we laugh at (the laughable) plus the individual's response to it, which is *comic laughter*. Passy and Dimova, in their use of terminology in relation to humor are influenced by the German tradition, while Bulgarian scholars doing research in language and humor, referring to humor research

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published in English, the author included, are influenced by the respective terminology in English. For such scholars, *humor* is the generic or key term for “any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses or is felt to be funny” (Attardo 1994: 4), where *humor* refers to both verbal (in the broad sense, *word play* being the narrower use) and non-verbal or situational humor such as *wit, pun, irony, satire, ridicule, tease, mock, fun, practical joke*, etc.

Nowadays some humor researchers in Bulgaria, primarily in literary studies, continue to focus on the analysis of laughter as a response to humor, but to analyze laughter without analyzing humor means to put the cart before the horse. What needs to be analyzed is the cause of humorous laughter. According to the incongruity theory of humor, the dominant theory in philosophy and psychology in English publications, incongruity is the cause of humor on the cognitive level. As a process humor includes the following stages: recognition of humor, comprehension of humor - identifying an incongruity on the cognitive level and (partially) resolving it, followed by appreciation of humor (Hay 2001) or experiencing the emotion of *mirth* (Martin 2007) or *exhilaration* (Ruch 1993) and laughter serves as an indicator of the understanding and the appreciation of humor. Laughter is the expected response from the recipient of humor, but it is not obligatory. Neither is humor the only cause of laughter: for example, one can laugh out of nervousness, embarrassment or intoxication. Even in conversation, where laughter definitely is one of the criteria in defining humor (Norrick 2004), it may serve other functions, other than a response to humor, that is; it may regulate the flow of conversation or mitigate the meaning of the preceding utterance (Vettin and Todt 2004).

It is also a fact that a number of humor scholars in Bulgaria use *anecdote* as a synonym of *joke*. An anecdote is a humorous story (real, but it might be fictitious) about a well-known real person, in which there might be more than one funny utterance and a joke is a fictitious story with a more complex structure in which there is only one humorous element in the punchline. In common parlance *anecdote* (source in Bulgarian either from French or Russian) used to have the same meaning as *joke*, but nowadays *joke* is currently used, while *anecdote* has become obsolete. In Bulgarian the German word *Witz* (виц) is used for a *joke* interchangeably with *шега* and *смешка* (the last one derived from *смях* or laughter).

Lack of unified terminology in humor research in Bulgaria and elsewhere is justified to some extent by the fact that humor is a complex phenomenon and how we define it depends on the perspective we take: whether we are interested in the things we laugh, whether we are interested in what causes it - an incongruity from a cognitive perspective; what goals and functions humor accomplishes in communication or how we respond to it. Another alternative is to define humor as the ability to create and perceive incongruity. Also, whether a given

exchange is humorous or not can be dependent on the speaker's intention or mental state alone: that is, the exchange might contain an incongruity, even a logical mechanism or a technique to resolve the incongruity to guarantee funniness, yet the exchange isn't funny. Consider the following exchange the author witnessed at a fruit and vegetable market:

“Where are the cherries from?”

“From the tree” (in a snappish voice).

B's response is a manifestation of the minimum requirement for something to occur, one of the humor techniques used in jokes. The knowledge that cherries are picked from trees is presupposed, so it doesn't need mentioning; with the speaker's humorous intention, the exchange would have been funny.

Humor scholars have to face another difficulty: humor terms denote categories with fuzzy boundaries that make it hard to talk about different types of humor. Additionally, the tools available to dictionary makers for the explication of word meaning are limited and in this sense dictionaries are not very reliable. The most frequently used dictionary tools for the explication of word meaning is either pointing out a hyponym or a synonym. To say that ‘humor is a mood’ or to explain *lampoon* through *ridicule* doesn't tell us much about either of them (*lampoon*: ‘a written attack ridiculing a person, group, or institution’ (The Free Dictionary).

There seems to be less confusion in the use of humor terminology among Bulgarian humorists. For them, satire is not a subtype of humor, but coexists with it, that is, both are of the same order, as in the newspaper rubric and radio program segment *Humor, Satire and Amusement*. At the same time, humor and satire are opposed and essentially it is the opposition between *laughing with* and *laughing at*. Another justification for the fact that *humor* is positively conceived by Bulgarian humorists and *satire* negatively comes from Chudomir – a pseudonym for Dimitar Hristov, a well-known Bulgarian humorous writer, according to whom “satire is the surgeon's scalpel and “humor is the ointment to the wound” (Cited in Zaimov 2000: 15). It turns out that the *Humor and Satire* newspaper rubric used by Bulgarian humorists (and journalists) is a very old one; it was used for the first time in the humorous newspaper *Alarm Clock* (будилник) in 1873. The heading under *Alarm Clock* read: *A Satirical and Humorous Paper* (Вестникъ сатирически и юморически). The distinction appeared again in 1875 when Hristo Botev (for many the best Bulgarian poet), wrote the following article in the newspaper *Banner: On Our Humorous and Satirical Journalism* (За нашата юмористическа

и сатирическа журналистика) (details about the newspapers from Borislavov [2014], the comments about the satire-and-humor distinction are mine).

## 2. Humor Research Before the Democratic Changes in 1989

The first scholarly articles on humor was written by Michail Dimitrov (1925): *The Psychophysiology of Laughter* appeared in the annual publications of Sofia University in 1925, followed by *The Psychology of Laughter* in *Philosophical Review* in 1929 and *A New Attempt at the Explication of Laughter and Humor* in the same journal in 1941. The articles fitted the then-current perspective on humor research that focused on laughter as a response to a humorous (my use of the term) stimulus or on what we experience when we encounter a humorous phenomenon. Dimitrov poses the following questions in relation to laughter: What makes us laugh? When do we laugh? When did man begin to laugh? In order to answer these questions, Dimitrov gives many examples of situational humor. The Belgian philosopher Eugene Dupreel is cited for various types of laughter: ludic, sardonic, reflex/physiological, etc.

In line with Herald Hoeffding's paper *Humor als Lebens Gefuehl* from 1918, Dimitrov argues that humor is a complex emotion and sympathy is an important part of it. The word "cause" for the emotion is left out in the exposition, but it is implied: the cause is the contradiction between "the grandeur and the insignificance and pettiness" (the translation of all Bulgarian citations in English are mine) in life. Laughter is the main focus but comments on two modern theories of humor through other German and French humor scholars are not an exception. Thomas Hobbes' superiority theory of humor is verbalized as "the theory of moral degradation" and Immanuel Kant's incongruity theory as "the contrast theory" with unexpectedness as its major component. Laughter is a response, but the stages that precede it that are in fact in line with the incongruity theory Dimitrov explicitly states: unexpectedness, followed by contradiction, followed by mood or a state of mind. The social aspect of laughter (humor) emphasized in Henri Bergson's *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* is also given due attention. According to Dimitrov, "laughter is a response of the social milieu to automatism, to habituality and routineness". The articles give if not a detailed, an introductory account of the superiority and incongruity theories.

Before the democratic changes in Bulgaria in 1989, the most influential book on humor, especially for scholars whose only language of research was Bulgarian and whose field of research was aesthetics and literary theory, was Passy's book *The Laughable* (СМЕШНОТО). The book underwent four editions, the first one in 1972 and the last in 2001, but there isn't much difference between the first and the last in revision and references. Passy analyzes the laughable

from the perspective of his own expertise and in the German philosophical and aesthetic tradition from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He uses two notions: *the comic* and *the laughable* that are simultaneously compatible and opposed. In its narrow sense, the comic is identical to the laughable and in its wider sense the comic is an attitude, a response and an act of creation of the subject to its object, that is, to the laughable. In other words, the comic, as an aesthetic category, has as its object the laughable and as its subject the laughter creator (СМЕХОТВОРЕЦЪТ). For Passy, “the laughable pertains to life, to nature, to non-artistic reality, while the comic only to art, to the artistic productive spirit, to the world of the sublime in its artistic multifacetedness” (1993: 18). And, more specifically, the laughable is “a deviation from a norm, from the normal” (ibid.: 135) or the trespassing of a taboo (ibid.: 137). The last two definitions are absolutely compatible with the present-day explication of humor from a social point of view (Freud 1905[1975], Kuipers 2006), where humor is, as pointed above, the all-encompassing category for the different types of its verbal and non-verbal manifestations used in humor research published in English. From such a perspective, Passy’s use of *the laughable* equates the use of *humor* as mentioned in the Introduction. Passy doesn’t quote any author for the claim that the laughable is a trespassing of a taboo and if he had Freud in mind, he never quoted him, since Freud’s writings in the totalitarian state were banned as bourgeois ideology. Passy also dwells on some mechanisms of the laughable such as surprise, exaggeration, minimization and word play (ibid.: 88-95).

Passy argues that *humor*, like parody and irony, is “a mode of thinking and feeling ... an attitude to life” (1993: 182). Passy’s understanding of humor is based on the changes in the meaning of the term through the ages. *Humor* comes from Gr. *chymos*, “juice or sap”, Old Fr. *humor*, *umor* for “liquid”. The ancient Greek and Roman physicians believed that the human body was filled with four substances or humors: black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood and that one’s health and character were dependent on the (im)balance of the four. If there was either an excess or deficit of one of the humors, then you were ‘humorous’ or sick. In the Middle Ages a disproportion in the humors lead to a ‘temporary state of mind’ or ‘mood’, then *humor* began to mean ‘whim’ or ‘caprice’ and finally to mean ‘a mindset’ as with Passy, which, more or less, amounts to ‘a sense of humor’.

Passy’s understanding of humor mirrors Moritz Lazarus’s view (quoted in Passy 1993: 188): “humor is a particular way of thinking and a spiritual state, to some extent a particular worldview”. Humor as an attitude to life is characterized with benign intention and playfulness. Not only humor, but the other forms of the comic such as parody and irony are also understood in worldview terms (ibid.: 183). Finally, satire is also viewed as an attitude to its object (ibid.:

186). When discussing humor, satire, parody and irony as a mindset or ability, Passy focuses mostly on the mindset of the creative man or the laughter creator in fiction and drama and less often on the mindset of ordinary man.

As far as parody goes, Passy acknowledges that the parodying text criticizes and contradicts the parodied one, yet it becomes clear from the examples he discusses from fiction and drama that parody essentially is a re-representation and a re-interpretation of a prior text without any element of diminishment or trivialization; the goal of parody is to criticize the present: for example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* in relation to Homer's *Odyssey* or Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* in relation to Friedrich Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans*.

According to Passy, irony involves a contradiction between what is said and meant, it is "a feigned agreement, approval or praise whose goal is actual disagreement, disapproval or reprimand...the feigned agreement, approval or praise is always some pretense, a pretense of the ironic subject" (ibid.: 269) and the prototypical uses of irony are indirect disagreement, disapproval and reprimand. Passy's understanding of irony corresponds to the pretense approach (Currie 2006), according to which in irony the speaker, in saying something, pretends to be somebody else, using appropriate characterization cues to make the pretense obvious. At the same time, the speaker detaches himself/herself from the person he/she pretends to be in order to belittle the person's viewpoint. For Passy, "humor, irony, parody belong to the spiritually created manifestations of the laughable and they are not possible without the creative activity of the subject. Predominantly they make themselves visible in verbal creative works, but they can be also observed in one's behavior as well as in acting" (ibid.: 199).

Passy discusses humor, parody and irony in three different chapters, while to satire and sarcasm (discussed again as the laughter creator's ability and response to the laughable) he allots only a few pages. Satire takes things seriously. In its extreme forms it is no longer playful, it ceases to provoke laughter and it gives vent to the anger and disgust of its creator (ibid.: 197-198). Sarcasm is similar to satire: it is "a devastating irony", it is "a direct and honest criticism" (ibid.: 282). Passy's understanding of the relation between *the laughable* and *the comic* and its manifestations can be represented as follows:

the comic (attitude) versus the laughable (deviation from a norm)

humor

parody

irony

satire

sarcasm

Wit belongs only to the comic and laughable objects and situations only to the laughable.

As mentioned above, Passy defines *the laughable* in social terms and *the comic* in terms of an attitude or a mindset, but he doesn't say much about either of them from a cognitive perspective. He acknowledges that Arthur Schopenhauer uses the term *Inkonguentz* most probably from an English source (ibid.: 61) as the cause for laughter, which he translates as *несъответствие* (one of the translation equivalents of *incongruity* in Bulgarian). Passy does use "contradiction", "comparison" or transition from one opposite to the other as a cause of wit and the laughable: a transition from the protagonist's claimed bravery to his/her manifested fear or a transition from his/her claimed unselfishness to greediness as a personality trait. The laughable is also seen as a relation between opposites (ibid. 61), which can be viewed as an approximation of the incongruity theory of humor, but it doesn't become obvious from the book that Passy is familiar with the incongruity theory of humor and, more specifically, with the criteria for a humorous incongruity as specified by Jerry Suls (1972): unexpectedness, illogicality and incongruity resolution in the sense of finding some unexpected similarity or resemblance between the two incongruous entities. Passy gives many examples from the works of the best authors of fiction and drama from ancient Greece and Rome to modern times, yet being unfamiliar with the incongruity theory, he doesn't have the tool to discuss how a humorous text is structured or how it develops to facilitate the introduction of an incongruity as well as the techniques for its (partial) resolution: in other words, how humor (my use of the term again) becomes an aspect of a text. The first scholar that focuses on some of the techniques used in jokes is Sigmund Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905[1975]): the techniques he proposes are condensation, displacement and indirect representation, which, according to him, are the same techniques that structure dreams. Perhaps Freud's idea of a joke technique is the only one worth salvaging from his psychoanalytic theory, which states that jokes are the result of an "unconscious process of letting thoughts and feelings into the conscious mind" – an assumption not supported by humor scholars in psychology and philosophy nowadays. In his understanding of *humor* and *the comic*, Passy is also influenced by Jean Paul Richter (1804), according to whom humor is a species of the comic and it is "inverted sublime".

In 1987 the proceedings of the international conference on *Laughter in Folklore* (Dinekov et al.), organized by the Institute of Folklore Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences appeared in print. The conference itself took place in 1983. What interests us here are

the papers of the Bulgarian participants. They focus on humor and humorous characters in folk songs, ballads, rituals and ritual dances as well as humorous elements in wedding, Easter and St. George's Day celebrations. In the proceedings, *humor* and *humorous* are alternatively used along with *the comic* and *comic* as generic terms.

Antonina Afanasieva-Koleva (1987), one of the conference participants, is the first Bulgarian scholar to write on the functions of the joke as a folkloric genre. For her the joke has an ambiguous nature. On the one hand, it is a direct negation of the negative aspects of everyday life; on the other hand, it is an indirect affirmation of moral, ethical, behavioral and other norms. It has a regulative social and evaluative function. The laughter it provokes sanctions the deviation from a norm. For Afanasieva-Koleva the laughter the joke elicits is not always benign, it can be mocking laughter.

The most important function of the joke though is its communicative one. It facilitates the setting up of a quick contact with the recipient and the elimination of social boundaries or, more specifically, it "creates a psychological atmosphere for a permanent or temporary neutralization of the communication restrictions imposed on the communicators by their different social status" (ibid.: 136). The elimination of social boundaries works for joke tellers of higher social status than the recipient's and not the other way round. Among peers and friends the joke facilitates the creation and the maintenance of amiable interaction and its locus are important events such as family celebrations, birthday parties, weddings, etc. On the individual level, the joke serves as a vehicle for the expression and realization of the self.

### 3. Humor Research After the Democratic Changes in 1989

Humor research in Bulgaria after 1989 is in the field of folklore studies, psychoanalysis, linguistics, journalism and media communication. Several scholars have focused on humor in the joke for two reasons. The first reason is that the joke text is very convenient for the study of verbal humor: it is short, it contains one easily identifiable humorous line, the punchline, it is easily reproduced and it is relatively independent from context. The second reason is that the genre was understudied mostly for political reasons. In the totalitarian state (1944-1989), the state party in Bulgaria censored and controlled all public media and nothing appeared in the media that might compromise the communist party.

Kosta Zaimov, in his book *The Joke: elements for its theoretical rationalization* (Вицът: елементи за неговото теоретично осмисляне) (2000) is strongly influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Zaimov doesn't speak of Freud's three-layered structure of the psyche, the Id, the Ego and the Superego and humor as a result of the interaction between them: he



speaks of the existence of “deep layers of the psyche” instead that are guided by “an inborn personality preprogram, which bears traces of man’s origin from animals” (2000: 138). The instinctual emotional system is subjected to the influence of the social environment and education that ultimately condition how the preprogram evolves. According to Zaimov, many jokes are motivated by the subsystems of the unconscious instinctual emotional system of the psyche that are verbally expressed in the joke text. For example, the following joke is a direct manifestation of the subsystem of aggression (Zaimov 2000: 149):

A little girl is crying in the street. A warmhearted old woman passes by and asks:

“Why are you crying, little girl?”

“Cause mummy drowned all the little kittens in the river...”

“How horrible!”

“Yes, horrible. She promised me to drown them myself...”

Other jokes are a verbal expression of other subsystems of the psyche such as the instinct of auto-aggression, of avoidance, of sexual behavior, etc. Zaimov, similarly to Freud, holds the view that “the pillar of the joke is wit” (2000: 229); in one of the two English translations of Freud’s *Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* *Witz* is translated as *wit* and not as *joke*. *Wit* is the translation equivalent of *Witz* in the Bulgarian translation.

Another mechanism employed in jokes to achieve a humorous effect is what Zaimov calls “paralogical thinking” that is analogous to “faulty logic” or “local logic” currently used in humor research published in English, as in the following joke (ibid.: 89):

Farmer Jim had to see a doctor. So he went to a neighboring town for a bath, but all the cabins in the bathhouse were taken and he had to wait for an hour.

“It’s unbelievable how many people see a doctor every day”, he muttered.

Zaimov finds some resemblance between “paralogical thinking” in jokes, on the one hand, and “paralogical thinking” in paranoid forms of schizophrenia and aphasic patients, on the other. He tells of a patient with paranoid schizophrenia who, when walking in the street with his wife and seeing a man passing them by, snapped angrily at her that she was having an affair with the man. When asked by Zaimov what made him think that the patient answered he was convinced his wife was having an affair with the man because he was wearing a blue tie and blue was his wife’s favorite color. Zaimov is right in pointing out that schizophrenic patients also think

paralogically, but other “ingredients” than faulty logic are required for an exchange or a text to count as humorous. And in this case the “ingredient” is the speaker’s humorous intention, that is, the switch from the serious to the humorous mode of communication and the structure and wording of the text, as illustrated below:

A jealous man is walking in the street with his wife when he suddenly sees a man wearing a blue tie. The husband turns angrily to his wife and says, “I know you’re having an affair with that man”.

“What makes you think I am?” His wife asks.

“Your favorite color”, the husband answers.

(Well, it might not be the best of jokes, yet theoretically it seems a sound one.)

Word play is yet another mechanism used in jokes, according to Zaimov. It needs noting here that the Bulgarian language, compared to English, offers fewer possibilities for word play. The reason is difference in the morphological systems of the two languages. As is well-known, word play is based on lexical ambiguity and what causes it are lexical relations such as polysemy and homonymy as well as metaphoric versus literal use of words. Another factor that influences word play is the tendency for shorter words. Nouns and verbs in Bulgarian have numerous (and longer) grammatical endings than the respective morphological categories in English. Gender with nouns is a grammatical category; nouns are masculine, feminine and neuter and each gender has a different ending for the plural. Additionally, the definite article in Bulgarian is in postposition added after the morpheme for the plural; it has complete and incomplete form to mark the syntactic function of the noun. Only nouns in subject position take the complete form of the definite article. Verbs have conjugational endings for first, second and third person singular and plural. Having this in mind, it is no surprise that in Bulgarian there are fewer jokes based on lexical ambiguity than there are in English.

Interesting are Zaimov’s observations on the associative thinking and the different stages in child language acquisition with his two children, a boy and a girl: babbling at the age of 9-10 months to two-word sentences consisting of content words at the age of a year and seven months. Special attention is paid to the neologisms they produce and the associative links they make (often “paralogical” as in jokes) based on the principles of analogy, contiguity and contrast (2000: 135). Word acquisition is a playful activity for his children accompanied by addition, omission or transposition of sounds and syllables and at the same time a serious cognitive task. Very often children produce serious utterances that are funny for adults as a

result of their incomplete and erroneous knowledge frames. In this respect Zaimov's son is no exception. At the age of four and four months, when taken for a walk, he sees an old man with a beard and is told that old men often have one. Back at home he suddenly asks: "Mummy, do old cars have a beard?" (ibid.: 129) – an erroneous analogy between old men and old cars. Element of wit in his children Zaimov registers at the age of around six.

For Zaimov "*the comic* is the generic concept that includes all subjective and objective aspects of *the laughable* (and as a synonym of *the laughable*)" (the italics are mine) (ibid.: 14). He has no proposal for humor. Instead, he quotes a Bulgarian humorous writer on humor, quoted in the Introduction.

In his book *The Joke and Its Messages* (Вицът и неговите послания) (2005) Stanoy Stanoev focuses on three types of jokes – political, sexual and ethnic that form a substantial part of the joke corpus in any culture. He follows the German folkloric tradition in the analysis of the joke, so he often uses *wit* (остроумие) to characterize it (as with Freud) and not *humor* (in German *Witz* means *wit* as well as the oral text containing humor, that is, *a joke*). Folklore studies on the joke focus on its oral existence and circulation, anonymity, social "indifference", typical characters and its variability. For Stanoev, there is a similarity between the riddle and the joke as folkloric genres and the latter is a continuation and a transformation of the former: the joke, like the riddle, also poses an enigma introduced in the punchline that the interpreter has to figure out. The anecdote and the joke are also compared: the former is based on the existence of common cultural experience, while with the latter the common experience has to be looked for and established for the first time (Stanoev 2005: 20). Also, with the anecdote the plot seems to be more important than the verbal presentation, which is the case with the joke.

Stanoev argues it is misleading to assume that the proliferation of underground political jokes in Bulgaria before the democratic changes in 1989 is a result solely of the political ideology of the one-party state that forbid open criticism of the powerful (2005: 48). During the first months after the changes the joke or the joke story (his term) only changed its locus: from an intensive form of oral communication it turned into an intensive written one – jokes, political jokes included, appear freely in joke books, in newspapers and magazines, not to mention the numerous internet sites for jokes. According to Stanoev, the reason for the proliferation of the joke story, both in oral circulation and in print, is the fact that it is not only a popular means of interpersonal interaction, fun and a safety valve for the release of tension. Instead, the joke is "a universal mechanism, tested through time, for the construction, sustenance and reenactment of human sociality" (ibid.: 21).

I can't agree less on the importance of the joke in the construction of man's representation of himself. Yet interesting differences emerge between political jokes in an authoritarian and a totalitarian state, on the one hand, and political jokes in a democracy, on the other, when they are viewed from a sociological perspective. The two types differ in their social significance for the powerless that create and tell banned political jokes. In the authoritarian and totalitarian state, underground political jokes have more than one social function. Minimally, they speak the politically unspeakable, are an indicator of public opinion and a substitute for freedom of speech. Maximally, they are a form of criticism and indirect protest against the oppressiveness of the political system. (Genova: 2014). The more repressive a political system is, the more important the political becomes in everyday interpersonal communication and from there the greater the flourishing of underground political jokes. It is not always the case that quantity contributes to quality, but this is what seems to have worked with underground political jokes. In addition, life in an authoritarian and a totalitarian state abounds in (funny) incongruities that are often more drastic than the ones in a democracy.

Ana Dimova's book *The Joke as a Linguistic and Cultural Phenomenon: German and Bulgarian parallels and contrasts* (Вицът като езиков и културен феномен. Немско-български паралели и контрасти) (2006) is the first in-depth contrastive analysis of the joke. Dimova examines various approaches to the joke: folkloric, psychological, philosophical and linguistic in German and Bulgarian scholarly works. She has done a tremendous work with German, Bulgarian, bilingual dictionaries and dictionaries of synonyms to establish the semantic field of the comic in the two languages (few scholars dare to do such a time consuming task). As far as *the comic* and *the laughable* go, Dimova, like Passy, adheres to the German tradition. For her, *the comic* is "identical to the laughable in the narrow sense, it is what evokes an adequate response, namely, comic laughter; it is the objective aspect of the relation *laughable* – *comic laughter*. In its wider sense, the comic includes a response – the subjective aspect of the same relation" (ibid.: 52). At the same time Dimova acknowledges that Albert Wellek makes no distinction between *the comic* and *the laughable* the way other German scholars do (Wellek quoted in Dimova 2006: 105).

For Dimova *humor* is an ability, an everyday conceptualization of the term in German and Bulgarian dictionaries; nevertheless she admits that there is also an alternative view on humor in German: it is "every message, imparted through action, spoken or written language whose goal is to evoke a smile or laughter" (Jan Bremer's view, quoted in Dimova 2006: 23), which emphasizes not only the intentional and communicative aspect of humor (my understanding of the term), but the product of the ability itself. As a product, the humorous

message, written or spoken, is situated between the comic (the subject) and the laughable (the object, Dimova's understanding of the terms) and has a reality of its own. As mentioned in the Introduction, dictionaries are not very reliable. According to the Bulgarian dictionary I referred to about *humor* (Andreichin et al. 1973) (the one Dimova cites is from 1959 (2006: 21)), *humor* is defined as follows: *humor* (from Lat.) 1). 'funny laughter and amusement'; 2). 'aptitude for funny laughter' and 3). 'humorous literature'. As seen from the dictionary entry, *humor* is defined not only as an aptitude or a propensity, but is equated to laughter.

When comparing the semantic field of the comic in German and Bulgarian, Dimova resorts to Schmidt-Hidding's semantic field of the comic for German and English (1963). According to Schmidt-Hidding, there are four focal attitudes to the comic in the two languages: wit, ridicule, humor and fun, situated as follows (ibid.: 38-49):

	wit	
	Witz	
	остроумие	
ridicule/mock		humor
Spott		Humor
присмех		хумор
	fun	
	Spass	
	шега	

Given below the German and English "attitudes to the comic" are the correspondent attitudes in Bulgarian Dimova found in dictionaries. For each of the four focal attitudes, the dictionary entries in the two languages are grouped around the nature of their referent: the entry either refers to an ability (for example, *humor*), to a quality (*humorous*), to a person having the quality (*humorist*), to an action (to *humor*) or to a manifestation/a product of the ability (e.g., *a humorous story*).

To repeat: in the humor research in language and humor published in English, *humor* is the generic or key-term for "any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses or is felt to be funny" (Attardo 1994: 4), where humor is defined in terms of its object, whereas in the German tradition humor is defined in terms of an ability or attitude of its subject. According to

Hempelmann, “German researchers...tend to speak of “the comic” as the generic term meaning humor (in the English sense, my comment), in analogy to German “*das Komische*,” because they don’t have a sense that “the comic” is a specific instance of a comedian” (2017: 39).

In *The Joke as a Linguistic and Cultural Phenomenon: German and Bulgarian parallels and contrasts*, a whole chapter is devoted to the translation of jokes, which “presupposes a very high linguistic competence on the part of the translator” (2006: 296). In addition, the translator has to take into account the specific narrative structure of the joke: the punchline as a trigger of humor and the translation difficulties when the latter introduces lexical ambiguity or word play. Dimova acknowledges the untranslatability of certain types of jokes and proposes the following scale for the translatability of jokes that is valid for German and Bulgarian: untranslatability, relative (un)translatability and translatability (2006: 302-304), but the scale is valid for the translation of jokes from any source into any target language.

*Studying Humor Seriously* (Genova 2013) begins with a critical analysis of the Superiority/Disparagement, the Incongruity and the Psychoanalytic/Release Theories of Humor. The two linguistic theories of humor are also discussed: Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humor (1985) and Attardo and Raskin’s General Theory of Verbal Humor (1991). The book focuses on ethnic and regional humor in Bulgaria that is not discussed in Dimova (2006). Bulgarian ethnic humor targets two minority groups only: Armenians and Gypsies. The standard opposition stupid versus canny doesn’t hold for the opposition Bulgarians versus Armenians or Gypsies. In jokes about Armenians, the stupid - canny polarity is within the ethnic group. Gypsies are mostly negatively stereotyped and are the target of racist jokes that one finds on the internet but not in print, but they are never stereotyped as stupid. Interestingly, the same holds for Rumanian ethnic jokes targeting Gypsies (Popescu 2011).

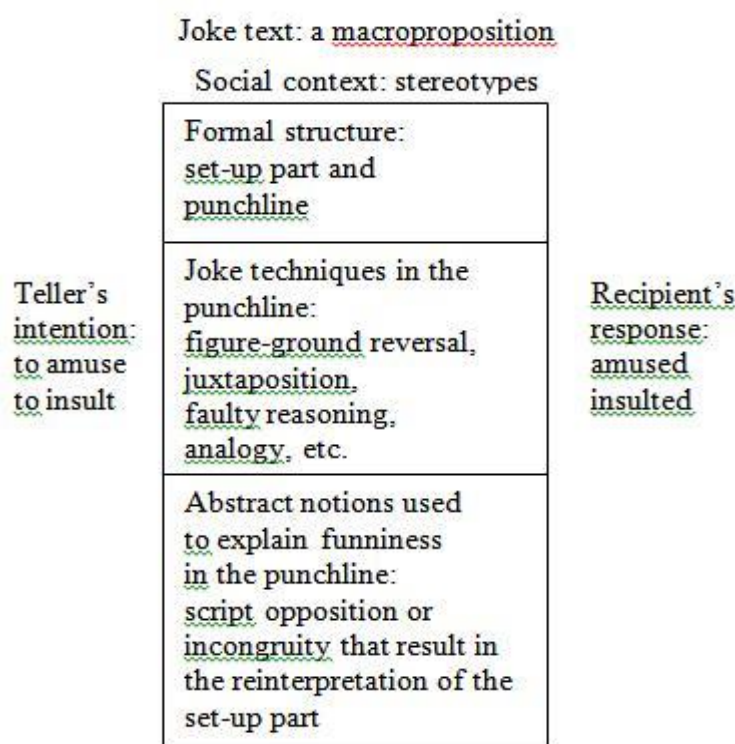
Gabrovian regional humor (jokes told by the citizens of the town of Gabrovo) and Shop regional humor (jokes told in the region around Sofia) are compared. Gabrovian jokes are monotopical – they are all about thriftiness and resourcefulness in everyday situations and activities. Gabrovian humor is mostly in-group self-reflexive humor. It has two main functions: self-mocking function as well as one Gabrovian outsmarting another. Self-mocking Gabrovian humor can be equally interpreted as self-praise and self-promotion, since humor is, by presumption, inherently ambiguous. In many Gabrovian jokes humor resides in the temporal sequencing of events, but there are also Gabrovian jokes in which humor is triggered by the sudden realization of the simultaneous presence of two alternative interpretations of the joke text. Shop humor is more varied. Originally there were only Shop jokes told by non-Shops to disparage Shops. Shops were stereotyped as lacking culture and refinement, as stupid and

stubborn within the opposition town population laughing at villagers. With time, Shops began to be stereotyped positively as well as quick-witted, resourceful and able to get out of any situation. Gabrovians laugh at themselves, whereas Shops laugh at the incongruities of life, at themselves and, most often, they laugh at the other with the intent(ion) to amuse. Nowadays the positive stereotyping of Shops is predominant, but negative stereotyping is also evident: Shops are perceived as hardheaded, conservative and lazy. One comes across negative stereotyping of Shops mostly on the internet, but it seems that the regional stereotyping of Shops is, in fact, a national self-reflexive negative one. Earlier studies on Bulgarian regional humor in academic journals from a folkloric position need to be mentioned here: Dobрева on Gabrovian humor (1991) and Dobрева on Shop humor (1994).

An entire chapter analyzes the most specific features of underground political jokes in the totalitarian state that is not found in Stanoev (2005) and Dimova (2006). According to Genova, the mode of communication in which underground political jokes in the totalitarian state are told, compared to other joke types, is closest to the serious mode of communication, whereas absurdity jokes are farthest from it (2013: 245). The most frequent target of underground political jokes was the gap between official ideology and practice; the jokes also targeted the repressiveness of the state, the inefficiency of the economy, the shortages of goods of necessity, the privileges of the nomenclature and the stupidity and incompetence of the party leadership.

In *Studying Humor Seriously*, special attention is paid to Bulgarian self-reflexive humor in jokes. The jokes are mostly from the period before the democratic changes in 1989. Bulgarians self-stereotype negatively as envious, lazy and moaning about things and, paradoxically, they self-stereotype positively as self-confident. In her corpus of about 12 000 jokes, Genova found no self-reflexive humor in English and American jokes. Dimova (2006) admits that there is no self-reflexive humor in German jokes either. The Germans mock at themselves in literary and philosophical writings, but not in jokes (ibid.: 273). In the Bulgarian joke space there are no religious jokes, while in the German there are no mother-in-law jokes (Dimova 2006: 280) that one finds in the Bulgarian joke space. The last chapter in *Studying Humor Seriously* is about the translatability of jokes. Genova argues that the translator is expected to be familiar with the formal structure of the joke, the joke techniques used in the punchline and he/she is expected to be familiar with the notion of incongruity (script opposition and overlap from the point of view of the General Theory of Verbal Humor). The linguistic and extralinguistic factors that lead to the (un)translatability of jokes are pointed out.

Genova's major contribution to humor in jokes, compared to Dimova (2006), is how the joke text is structured or how it develops to facilitate the introduction of an incongruity and the techniques employed for its (partial) resolution: in other words, how humor becomes an aspect of the joke text – its brevity and implicitness to say the least. The author also argues that, as a theoretical minimum, humor should be approached simultaneously from a cognitive, linguistic and social point of view. The structure and the communicative content of the joke are represented in the diagram below (Genova 2011: 93).



In *A Natural History of Bulgarian Laughter* (2014) Yassen Borislavov focuses on the functions of laughter in humorous (my use of the term) newspapers in two periods of Bulgarian history: from 1863 to 1878, the year when Bulgaria gained independence from the Ottoman Empire and the second period from 1878 to 1912. In the first period, known as the period of the Bulgarian Renaissance, 17 humorous newspapers were published, most of them in Rumania. The first one, *Bagpipe*, appeared in 1863 in Istanbul. Its subtitle read: *A Satirical Newspaper on the Bulgarian Situation*. Two other humorous newspapers from the same period are worth mentioning: *Drum* and *Alarm Clock*. The laughter in the newspapers had “political and didactic functions” (Borislavov 2014: 108). On the one hand, the newspapers were expected to inform its readers, to criticize the foibles of Bulgarians and, on the other, to advocate traditional Bulgarian and family virtues. Borislavov sticks to the humor-and-satire



(or satire-and-humor) opposition Bulgarian humorists and journalists adhered to then and now. Satire, according to him, presupposes an asymmetrical relation between the humorist and his/her target. In satire the humorist is morally superior to the object of satire, while humor presupposes a symmetric relation between the communicators and its goal is “pleasure, amusement and shared joy. It is a form of interaction stemming from the conviction that laughter is a manifestation of **natural solidarity**” (bold in the original) (ibid. 33). The newspapers of the period are predominantly oriented to satire. For Borislavov the laughable gravitates around humor and irony, conceived as positive, and satire and sarcasm conceived as negative (ibid.: 110). Apart from the humor-and-satire distinction, Borislavov uses *laughter* and *the laughable* as generic terms. He distinguishes between satirical, sarcastic, biting and mocking laughter, on the one hand, and humorous, ironic, teasing, carefree, joyous and hedonistic laughter, on the other.

In Borislavov’s view from an instrument of political ideology and lampoon of one’s political adversaries from 1978 to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. the satirical and humorous print media assumed a new public role, their professional role of informing the public. Newspapers also played a very important role in the dissemination of humor (my use of the term) by making city daily life contrasts and paradoxes known to a greater number of citizens. The humorous newspaper most deserving Borislavov’s scholarly attention is *Balgaran* (БЪЛГАРАН, a humorous distortion of *Bulgarian* as a noun). It appeared in print from 1904 to 1909 and there was always a caricature on its front page. *Balgaran* abounded in different text forms such as feuilletons, humorous stories, dialogues, epigrams, jokes and aphorisms. Its contributors often parodied on acts of parliament, reviews, feature articles, announcements and advertisements. The newspaper targeted the prince, politicians as well as personality traits such as social climbing, job- and profit-seeking. The demotion of the sublime and the exalted to the mundane and the trivial and the elevation of the latter to the former were often used techniques to achieve a humorous effect, which is, in fact, analogous to the carnivalesque tradition in Europe of inverting social roles and disregarding moral values. “As a mood, perspective on the world and goal, the laughter in *Balgaran* is totally different from the satire of the Bulgarian Renaissance period. It is most of all a source of amusement, joy and pleasure” (Borislavov 2014: 197).

Several humorous and satirical newspapers succeeded *Balgaran* after 1909 in the following order: *Wasp*, *Chanticleer* and *Laughter*. Some members of the *Balgaran* editorial board became members of the editorial boards of the new newspapers. The target of humor and satire in them alternated between politics, on the one hand, and family, love, marriage and

social events, on the other. The social function of the laughter was the mitigation of social tension and contrast and the elimination of social boundaries.

*A Natural History of Bulgarian Laughter* can be interpreted on two levels: as a history of the Bulgarian satirical and humorous (and humorous and satirical) newspapers from the middle of the XIX c. to 1912 and as the author's understanding of humor and satire as the two focal points for all positive and all negative manifestations of laughter, respectively. What hasn't been achieved is how precisely humor and satire are manifested in the text.

In 2008 the proceedings of the international conference on *Humor: Grenzüberschreitende Spielarten eines kulturellen Phaenomens*, organized the same year by the Faculty of Humanities at Konstantin Preslavsky University, were published in Goettingen. The collection consists of linguistic, cultural and literary studies by Bulgarian, German and Austrian scholars on humor in the cultures of their own countries and in cross-cultural context. The authors acknowledge the illusiveness and complexity of humor as a research topic when viewed both as a cultural phenomenon and as an individual personality trait. They focus on its cognitive, emotive and communicative aspects and functions. Some issues in the translatability of humor are also pointed out: translatability doesn't depend on language, as expected, but on the interpretation of culture specific experiences. Several papers comment on the role of humor in foreign language teaching.

The collection of papers *Humor: Views, Practices, Techniques* (Хуморът: прочити, практики, техники) (2013) is the meeting point of Bulgarian researchers from various areas in the humanities: folklore studies, linguistics, literary studies, cultural and history studies with a lasting interest in humor research with most of them. Some of the contributors had already written a book on humor, for other contributors humor was the main or related topic in their dissertation.

The first area of humor can be defined as *anthropological*. It traces the significance and functions of humor and its forms in everyday culture in different social, historical and cultural contexts. In the paper, "*A pessimist walks along the street...*" *Political jokes from the socialist era* Stanoy Stanoev asks again the question if the pervasive telling of political jokes in the totalitarian state can be interpreted as a manifestation of protest against the political regime and supports the claim that they are rather a symptom of the opposite. The same issue, this time in jokes from the Third Reich, is the object of study in Valentin Spiridonov's paper *Political jokes in national socialist Germany as historical evidence*. The author also shares the understanding that telling political jokes cannot be interpreted as a form of protest, yet it serves as historical evidence for the manner in which people perceived and responded to political pressure and

propaganda on the part of the power machinery of the totalitarian state. In *Plug the Fridge into the Radio Socket or about the Gap between Delegated Reality and Reality*, Dafina Genova holds the view that the political joke in the former socialist countries served as a substitute for freedom of speech as well as an indicator of public opinion. According to the author, the fact that this type of joke was not institutionalized supports the claim for its role as social critique and protest against the totalitarian state (more about political jokes in the totalitarian state in Stanoev (2009) and Genova (2014)).

Of interest is Grigor Grigorov's paper, *The Joke Cycle Island of Cannibals: Structure, Functions, Messages* in which the crossing point between the semantics and the structure of the joke is sought in a given joke cycle. It turns out there is something more behind the circulation of one or other joke cycle in a given narrative tradition, namely, the joke's potential to precisely observe and make generalizations about the culture and the character of its tellers. Venko Kanev's paper, *The Funny Laughter of the Consummative Society* also focuses on the indicatory possibilities of laughter. Laughter of today is a sign of the frustration, indifference and nihilism of modern man, a refuge of his insecurity and tentative identity. Through the media, humor has turned into a commodity whose sole goal is to entertain the consumer and not serve its function as a social corrective. As a kind of antithesis to such troublesome speculations is the cheerful character of the Eastern man of wisdom Nasreddin Hoca, as known in Bulgaria. In *The Multifaced Nasreddin Hoca and His Image on the Balkans*, Dorotea Dobreva traces the wanderings of this popular cunning character in the anecdotal tradition and in the literature of the Balkan peoples and most of all in Bulgaria, as well as his encounters with local brothers in cunning.

Other papers share common interest in uncovering some of the mechanisms through which funniness is constructed. In *The Laughter of Words: Malapropisms and Yotovisms in Bulgarian Literature*, Radoslav Radev analyzes the linguistic, cultural and esthetic effect of malapropisms and word play in Bulgarian literature. The spontaneous blending of formally used words and styles, the incorrectly learned loan words and the intentionally sought witticisms are techniques that enable the authors of fiction to depict the wider social, historical and cultural contexts of their characters. In *Aspects of the Play within the Comic in "Svejk" and "Bai Ganyo"*, Bogdan Dichev looks for the basis for a comparative analysis of two classical works of fiction in Bulgarian and Czech literature. The type of laughter in them is of a different kind – in the first case it gravitates around the carnivalesque tradition and in the second, it is rather reduced to satire and the grotesque.

Milena Popova in her paper, *The Anecdote and Pragmatic Theories*, analyzes humor in the joke from the point of view of linguistic pragmatics. In addition to the violation of Grice's cooperative principle and its maxims, humor effect is achieved when violating felicity conditions of speech acts and politeness principles and strategies. Yana Sivilova's paper *Play with meanings: punchlines* is within the same linguistic paradigm. The author questions well-established linguistic hypotheses for the fact that humor dysfunctionalizes language in order to entertain. Using a lot of examples from different languages and children's speech, the author shows how word play focuses our attention on language rules and makes use of their inconsistencies resulting in its socially integrative and communicative potential. Ralitsa Demirkova in *Is every instance of word play humorous?* pays attention to the socio-pragmatic factors in the construction of humor. The author analyzes carefully various types of word play and the techniques used to achieve a humorous effect. Demirkova proposes a number of criteria to distinguish between humorous and non-humorous word play and her own understanding of language play and word play.

### Conclusion

In Bulgarian scholarly works *the laughable*, *the comic*, *humor* and *satire* are the terms most often used in relation to phenomena eliciting laughter. For Dimitrov (1941) *humor* is a complex emotion and sympathy is an important part of it; for Passy (1993) humor is an "attitude to life," characterized with benign intention (analogous to 'a sense of humor'). For Passy, *the laughable*, *the comic* and *humor as a species of the comic* are aesthetic categories; nowadays they are conceived as psychological and linguistic entities. For Dimova (2006), *humor* is an ability, based on evidence from dictionaries, although she doesn't specify whether it is cognitive, emotional or both. For Passy and Dimova, *the comic* is a more general notion than *the laughable*: it consists of what we laugh at (the laughable) plus the individual's response to it or *comic laughter*.

For Borislavov (2014), *humor* and *satire* are the two focal points for all positive and all negative manifestations of laughter, respectively. Borislavov comments on the Superiority and Psychoanalytic theories of humor, but not on the Incongruity theory, the most widely accepted theory of humor nowadays. His claim that one of the goals of humor (his understanding of the term) is pleasure is questionable, to say the least. According to Csikzentmihalyi, pleasure doesn't produce any psychological growth. The satiation of biological needs such as sleeping, eating or having a good meal are pleasurable experiences, while experiencing enjoyment presupposes a challenge, stretching the limits of the self that result in psychological growth, for

example, playing a game (1990). Enjoyment, on the other hand, another goal of humor (his use of the term) according to Borislavov, is a humor (my use of the term) related psychological experience in Mike Martin's view (1983). For Passy and Borislavov, *incongruity* is a minor concept, but it is a central analytical tool for Genova, along with the two linguistic theories of humor, the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (Raskin 1985) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo and Raskin 1991).

Zaimov (2000: 14) uses *the comic* as a generic term interchangeably with *the laughable* and in his use both are analogous to *humor* as a generic term in English. For Genova *humor* is the generic term that coincides with Zaimov's *the comic* and *the laughable*. In spoken discourse the adjective *смешен* is most frequently used and not *комичен* (comic) to characterize something as funny. Among Bulgarian scholars, there is no terminological deviation in the understanding and use of *satire*: the use of humorous techniques with the intention to criticise the powerful.

What needs to be done in the future is to study humor in spontaneously occurring conversations, the most natural locus for humor. And the most laborious task in this direction has already been accomplished: there is a large corpus of transcribed Bulgarian conversations uploaded on the internet for future humor researchers to use.

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