

**“Scientists Joke”: Evolution and Genres of Humour
about Science and Scientists in Russia**

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Abstract. The paper analyses humour about scientists and humour produced by scientists in Russia. The aim of the study is to track back the evolution of scholarly humour and analyse social factors that stand behind professional humour in the academia. The analysis centres around three categories of humour: “intellectual” humour, which requires knowledge in a specific branch of science, “professor vs. student” humour, which is based on our understanding of social relations between two social groups involved in academic communication. Finally, there is profession-specific humour based entirely on professional experience and is best understood by those involved in research. While “intellectual” and “professor vs. student” jokes are not unique to the Russian culture, profession-specific in-group humour reflects social problems characteristic of science in Russia. This category of scholarly humour has grown from the ongoing debates about criteria of academic excellence and the discussions about importance of science for society in general. Profession-specific humour mirrors social tension caused by the attempts to introduce quantitative measures of academic excellence and to reform science in Russia (the recent attempts at turning around the Russian Academy of Sciences being a good example of such a reform).

Keywords: academic communication, Russian culture, social relations, humour.

1. Types of Scholarly Humour

As many other spheres of professional communication (e.g., medical or legal), academic discourse has developed its own humour. A variety of sources contribute to the existence of humour about scientists or created by scientists, among which the most important are education, common social and cultural background and literary sources (Măda & Săftoiu, 2012). Jokes, cartoons and visual parodies about those who do research and teach at the universities reflect various aspects of life of those who choose science as their profession.

The official appearance of scholarly humour in the Soviet Union dates back to mid-1960s, when the first book titled “Physicists Tell Jokes: A Collection of Translations” was published (Konobeev et al., 1966). Compiled by a group of

physicists from Obninsk, a town near Moscow with multiple research centres in nuclear physics, it contained translations of humorous texts ascribed to American scientists. Despite the official disapproval of authorities, the book was a success, and its second, updated edition titled “Physicists Continue To Tell Jokes” came out only two years later (Konobeev et al., 1968). Later the idea of collecting jokes about scientists and humorous texts written by researchers was echoed by a number of books such as “Psychologists Also Tell Jokes” (Yurevich, 2003), “Linguists Tell Jokes” (Kiklevich, 2006) and “Mathematicians Also Tell Jokes” (Fedin, 2009). The books offered their readers texts and jokes that came from different sources and belonged to various genres of scholarly humour, e.g., anecdotes about scientists, ironic texts giving advice on how to become a researcher or how to present research results at a conference. Separate sections were traditionally devoted to student folklore and collections of canned jokes that required certain knowledge of a particular branch of science.

One can easily notice the similarity of book titles. This, on the one hand, was the sign of unspoken rivalry between various branches of science in the Soviet and later Russian society (with physics traditionally considered to be the most prestigious area of research). So, by titling the book “Mathematicians also tell jokes” the editors claimed that mathematics could also enjoy a high profile. On the other hand, the strategy of echoing the titles of other humorous books was a way to break the stereotype about the stylistic norms of academic discourse: humour has become the “spice” that added “human notes” to the otherwise rigid and impersonal style of scholarly communication.

Today Russian academic humour is not limited to books. Internet gave rise to new forms and genres of humour, e.g., humorous Twitter accounts that fake news about life of scientists in Russia, collections of scientists’ quotations and witticisms that exist on the social networks, visual parodies and demotivational posters which, along with canned jokes and humorous texts, circulate via social networks and reflect the joys and routine of those who pursue academic career.

Though this paper analyses samples of academic humour that circulate in Russia, it is very likely that some jokes cited here exist in other cultures. This comes as no surprise, however, since “Where jokes are concerned, there are no tariffs, no cartels, no monopolies, no political appointees on the bench given to distorting the law, no funding bodies with agendas – it is the freest of all forms of spontaneous order and worth studying for this reason alone (Davies, 2011, p. 2).

In this paper I will analyse three major categories of academic humour: intellectual jokes, i.e. jokes that come from a particular branch of science (e.g. physics, mathematics or linguistics), “professor vs. student” humour (which falls into a broader category of social humour) and professional scholarly humour that depicts the routine of scientists’ professional life (for instance, texts that parody the processes of writing and defending dissertations or visual humour that shows the

“dark side” of administrative reforms of research institutions undertaken in Russia in the past few years).

The three categories of humour mentioned above draw on different types of knowledge. Intellectual jokes are “science-specific”, as they can be best understood by those who have at least some idea about the concepts, theories or research methods characteristic of a particular branch of science.

“Professor vs. student” humour generally targets the relations between the main participants involved in academic discourse. This kind of humour falls into the broader category of social humour and breaks the boundaries of professional discourse. Normally, these jokes do not require any specific knowledge of science as the humour is based on the cleverness-stupidity opposition.

Finally, there is an in-group humour about professional life of scientists, or profession-specific humour. It focuses on the scientists’ working experience or, rather, on the gaps between expectations and real life of researchers. As profession-specific, this category of in-group humour is limited to academic discourse. In terms of genres it includes canned jokes, “How to...” texts which parody serious academic writing, visual humour (e.g. demotivational posters) and videos.

In the next sections these three categories of academic humour will be discussed in more detail.

2. Intellectual Humour

Intellectual humour is created to demonstrate how knowledge about the world can be played with. Because play with knowledge, like any other play, is “free, voluntary and separate from ordinary life” (Plester, 2016, p. 6), it serves as an antidote to the rigor of scientific knowledge. Many intellectual jokes target existing stereotypes about how scientists perceive the world. Traditionally, mathematicians are nerds who demonstrate excessive analytical precision while solving the simplest tasks, physicists are weird and linguists are people who cannot speak languages properly.

[1] Математик, биолог и физик сидят в кафе и смотрят, как в дверь дома напротив входят и выходят люди. Сначала в дом зашли двое, позже из дома вышли три человека.

Физик: «Измерения были неточны».

Биолог: «Они размножились».

Математик: «Если сейчас в дом войдет ровно один человек, дом снова станет пустым».

A Mathematician, a Biologist and a Physicist are sitting in a street cafe watching people going in and coming out of the house on the other side of

the street. First they see two people going into the house. After a while they notice three people coming out of the house.

The Physicist: "The measurement wasn't accurate".

The Biologist: "They have reproduced".

The Mathematician: "If right now exactly one person enters the house, it will be empty again".

The explanations of a very simple fact offered by all three researchers demonstrate stereotypical perception of the ways of reasoning in various branches of science: physicists rely on measurements, mathematicians use calculations, and biologists explain how new life begins with the concept of reproduction. The target of the joke, however, is the distance between all three explanations and the reality. Sometimes understanding of intellectual jokes requires good knowledge of a particular science. The next pair of jokes illustrates the case. The first joke seems an easy one:

[2] Прохожий обращается к математику:

- Скажите пожалуйста, как найти площадь Ленина?

- Надо длину Ленина умножить на ширину Ленина.

A passer-by asks a mathematician:

- Excuse me, how can I find Lenin Square?

- You should multiply Lenin's length by Lenin's width.

To understand the joke one needs to have just a basic knowledge of geometry. However, the extension of this joke requires more specific knowledge of mathematics:

[3] Только неграмотный математик на вопрос "Как найти площадь Ленина?" ответит: "Надо длину Ленина умножить на ширину Ленина".

Грамотный скажет, что надо взять интеграл по поверхности!

Only a bad mathematician will tell you that to find Lenin Square one needs to multiply Lenin's length by Lenin's width. A good mathematician will tell you that you need to take a surface integral.

Along with revealing stereotypes about scientists, intellectual jokes target important social issues, such as validity of research findings and significance of science for the society in general. In examples [4] and [5], the target of the jokes is twofold: firstly, it is the tendency to interpret various phenomena in a straightforward manner. Secondly, the jokes demonstrate that the correlation of mathematicians' findings with practical life is not always obvious for other people. In example [4], mathematicians offer their interpretation of a numerical expression

widely used to talk about an ideal female body. Instead of applying the numbers to a body shape, the scientists give an answer that does not refer to anything and is completely useless:

[4] Российские математики наконец-то дали ответ на волнующий всех женщин вопрос: что такое $90*60*90$. Оказалось, что это 486 000.
Russian mathematicians finally answered the question asked by many women: what does the expression $90*60*90$ mean. It is an equivalent of 486 000.

The next joke uses a pattern where a researcher is offered simple practical tasks, which are solved with rigour and precision traditionally required for real experimental research:

[5] Математику предлагают решить задачу: «Дана газовая плита, кран с водой и чайник. Требуется вскипятить воду.
– Это легко, — отвечает он, — сначала наливаем в чайник воду. Потом зажигаем огонь и ставим чайник на плиту.
– Хорошо, теперь новая задача, — говорят ему. — Требуется вскипятить чайник, в котором вода уже налита.
– Ну, это еще проще! Выливаем из чайника воду и сводим задачу к предыдущей.
A mathematician is solving a problem: “You have a stove, a water tap and a kettle. The task is to boil water”.
“Oh, that’s easy! We pour some water into the kettle, turn on the stove and put the kettle on”, — answers the scientist.
“Ok, now here is the next problem. You need to boil water, but this time there is already some water in the kettle”.
“Well, that’s even simpler! Pour the water out of the kettle and then do as in the previous task!”

Typically, in such jokes scientists offer solutions that are much too complicated in comparison with the simplicity of the problems. By denying the effectiveness of the scientist’s effort the joke targets the gap between the popular wisdom and scientific explanations.

Another typical pattern of an intellectual joke involves a competition between several researchers who represent their own branches of science. The plot centres around one, usually very basic problem that normally either has a simple solution or does not even require one. In the joke, the task is solved by the characters in accordance with the methods traditionally used in their branch of science. The comparison of task solutions often used in intellectual jokes reflects

the rivalry between various branches of science and the researchers' desire to prove their social relevance. Traditionally, the least prestigious are humanities, but in the jokes humanitarians often surpass those who work in hard sciences in their ability to find a simple solution to a problem.

[6] Химик, физик, математик и филолог получили задание измерить высоту башни с помощью барометра.

Химик измерил давление у подножия башни и на крыше и выяснил, что ее высота от 0 до 100 метров.

Физик сбросил барометр с крыши, замерил время падения и вычислил, что высота башни от 60 до 70 метров.

Математик измерил высоту барометра, длину тени барометра и длину тени башни, сосчитал тангенс угла и выяснил, что высота башни от 63 до 64 метров.

Филолог продал барометр, напоил на вырученные деньги сторожа, и тот рассказал ему, что высота башни 63 метра 40 сантиметров.

A chemist, a physicist, a mathematician and a philologist were given a task to measure the height of a tower with a barometer.

The chemist measured the air pressure at the bottom and on the top of the tower and suggested that the height of the tower is between 0 and 100 meters.

The physicist threw the barometer from the top of the tower, measured the fall time and suggested that the height of the tower should be between 60 and 70 meters.

The mathematician measured the height of the barometer, the length of the shadow of the barometer, the length of the shadow cast by the tower, counted the tangent and found that the height of the tower is between 63 and 64 meters.

The philologist sold the barometer, bought some wine and gave it to the night-keeper of the tower, who confirmed that the height of the tower was precisely 60 meters and 40 cm.

The social prestige of science depends on the research methods used by scholars and the validity of research results. Traditionally, experimental studies are considered to be the most reliable way of acquiring new knowledge. Calculations are also a good way of getting valid results, as they are precise and can be verified. Pure theoretical reasoning, however, is the least trustworthy method of research:

[7] Ректор университета мрачно просматривает смету расходов, которую принес декан физического факультета:

– И почему это у физиков всегда такое дорогое оборудование? Вот берите пример с математиков, они просят деньги только на бумагу, карандаши и ластик.

Немного подумав, добавляет:

– А философы еще лучше. Им даже ластик не нужны.

A university rector looks gloomily at the price list of the equipment for the Department of Physics:

– Why do these physicists need such expensive equipment? Take mathematicians, for example. All they ask is to buy them paper, pencils and rubbers.

Having thought for a while he adds:

– The philosophers are still better. They do not even need rubbers.

While physicists use experimental data and mathematicians can check and correct their calculations, whatever the philosophers write, cannot be verified, so even minor corrections are not necessary.

The issue of general credibility of scientific knowledge can also become the target of the joke. The credibility can be questioned either by lay people, as in examples [8] and [9], or by researchers themselves, as in example [10].

[8] Подходит как-то обыватель к лингвисту и говорит:

– Вот скажи, ты немецкий небось в совершенстве знаешь, да?

– Ну, может, не в совершенстве, но знаю,— скромно отвечает лингвист.

– А вот скажи, как перевести фразу "Ich weiß nicht"?

– Я не знаю.

– Ну вот, и никто не знает!!!

A passer-by comes to a linguist and says:

– So, you can speak German really well, right?

– Well, maybe my knowledge of it is not perfect, but yes, I do speak German.

– Then tell me, how do you translate "Ich weiß nicht"?

– I don't know.

– There! See? Nobody knows!

[9] Гениальное изобретение сделали отечественные ученые. Они создали сотовый телефон с телевизором, радиоприемником, DVD-проигрывателем, компасом, электробритвой, микроволновой печью, обогревателем, пылесосом, холодильником и унитазом. Правда, работает пока только унитаз.

A new great mobile phone has been invented by Russian scientists. It has an inbuilt TV, a radio, a DVD-player, a compass, an electric razor, a microwave

oven, a heater, a vacuum cleaner, a fridge and a toilet. However, only the toilet works so far.

[10] Итак, вы написали трактат и хотите опубликовать его. Поступите следующим образом:

Если вы понимаете, что написали и можете доказать это – пошлите в какой-нибудь математический журнал!

Если вы понимаете, что написали, но не можете доказать это – пошлите в журнал по физике!

Если вы не понимаете, что написали, но можете доказать это – пошлите в журнал по экономике!

Если вы ничего не понимаете, что написали и не можете доказать это – пошлите в журнал по философии!

If you have written a research paper, there are several options for publishing it:

If you understand what you've written and you can prove it, send your paper to a journal on mathematics!

If you understand what you've written but you cannot prove it, send your paper to a journal on physics!

If you don't understand what you've written but you can prove it, send your paper to a journal on economics!

If you don't understand what you've written nor can you prove it, send your paper to a journal on philosophy!

Intellectual humour is not limited to jokes about scientists. A new source of witticisms and ironic comments about scientists is a Twitter account “Skolkovskie uchenye (@SK_Scientists)”. A small town near Moscow, in the recent years Skolkovo has developed into a center of innovative research projects in various spheres of hard sciences. The development of Skolkovo as a research institution is lavishly funded by the Russian government, while many other universities are not supported financially. However, the results achieved so far by people working in Skolkovo are not as impressive as they were supposed to be. The Twitter messages parody news about research and new findings of Skolkovo scholars. The messages often involve word play and describe totally useless research projects:

[11] Сколковские учёные вычислили, что ускорение свободного падения в России составляет 2 рубля в сутки.

The Skolkovo researchers counted the free fall acceleration of the Russian ruble. It equals 2 rubles a day.

[12] В связи с запретом импорта украинских продуктов, Сколковским учёным поручено разработать искусственное сало. Выделено 1,5 миллиарда.

Due to the ban on Ukrainian food, the Skolkovo researchers are given the task to create artificial lard. The project costs 1,5 billion rubles.

Another popular topic for jokes is the relation between science and religion. In the past few years the Russian Orthodox Church has established its temples in many universities including those specializing in physics. The desire of the church elite to play an important role in education also results in opening new theological departments. By establishing connections between the Church and science the Twitter account @SK_Scientists targets the issue of validity of research results:

[13] Сколковские учёные по просьбе Патриарха научились разлагать святую воду на святой кислород и святой водород.

At request of his Holiness, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, the Skolkovo researchers found a way to degrade holy water into holy oxygen and holy hydrogen.

[14] Сколковские учёные доказали, что в замкнутой системе при любых процессах суммарный лептонный заряд остается неизменным по воле божьей.

Researchers of Skolkovo proved that in a self-contained system under any circumstances the lepton charge remains constant by the God's will.

Though intellectual humour requires at least some knowledge about science, it is not restricted solely to academic discourse. Its existence and the emergence of new forms and genres can be explained by the social relevance of science. Jokes highlight stereotypes about scientists and raises socially relevant issues, e.g. prestige of various branches of academic studies or the validity of research results.

3. Social Relations in Academic Discourse: “Professor vs. Student” Humour

There are several genres of humour that draw on the relations between professors and students. Firstly, there are traditional canned jokes about students sitting an exam, as in [15].

[15] Студент возмущен низкой оценкой, полученной на экзамене:

– Профессор, я прослушал все Ваши лекции, прочел все работы и выполнил все задания!

Молодой человек, когда я воевал, у нас в гарнизоне был осел, Он прошел с нами все битвы, на нем возили снаряды в самых крупных сражениях, но он так и остался ослом.

A student is annoyed by his low exam grade:

- Professor, I have visited all your lectures, I have read all your publications and I have done all the tasks you gave us!
- Young man, when I was in the army, we had a donkey. He survived all the battles, and we used him for carrying missiles, but he remained a donkey anyway.

The implicit parallel between a student and a donkey, traditional symbol of stupidity in the Russian culture, demonstrates impossibility for students to be on par with their professors. The joke is also an example of traditional stupidity jokes (Davies, 2011). Professor-student interaction turns into a competition between the smart and the stupid, in which both parties can be winners or losers. While the published collections of “professor vs. student” jokes usually show smart professors who take their students down a peg, in the jokes that circulate on the Internet “the smart” and “the stupid” swap their places. Jokes [16] and [17] show cunning students who manage to outsmart their professors:

[16] Пришел студент в столовую, а все столики заняты, подсаживается к профессору, а тот говорит: – Гусь свинье не товарищ.

Студент: – Ну ладно, я полетел.

A student comes to a canteen and sees that all tables are occupied. The student takes a seat next to a professor who says: “A goose and a pig cannot be friend”.

The student replies: “Well, ok, then I’ll fly away”.

The Russian idiom “A goose and a pig cannot be friends”¹ implies that two people, whose nature or social positions are very different, cannot be equal. A goose is a smart bird that can fly high while the pig is associated with stupidity and inability to learn.

Intellectual rivalry between those who possess knowledge and those who want to acquire it is the source of the following joke:

[17] Профессор логики на лекции:

– Всем известно, что два отрицания дают одно утверждение, т.е. “нет” на “нет” дает в итоге “да”; но еще ни разу не случилось, чтобы два утверждения дали в итоге одно отрицание...

Голос из зала:

– Ну да, конечно...

Professor of logic during the lecture:

¹ The rough English translation for this idiom is “oil and water don’t mix”, however, it does not imply any social inequality.

– It is a well-known fact that two negations equal a positive statement, that is, a “no” and another “no” lead to “yes”. However, it is impossible to make a negation with two positive statements.

A voice from the student audience:

– Yeah, right...

The punch line of the joke is usually pronounced with a sarcastic intonation, which implies negation. The student’s sarcasm challenges the professor’s logic and, in the same manner as in joke [16], puts the professor in the position of the one who knows nothing about the real world.

Apart from jokes, there is a genre of spontaneous humorous witticisms and quotations of what professors say at the lectures or seminars. These quotations circulate predominantly on the Russian social network “Vkontakte” (“In Contact”), in which a lot of Russian schools and universities have special group accounts titled “Overheard in ...”. While the names of the students who post utterances remain unknown, the names of the professors, the authors of utterances and jokes, are posted online.

The following quotations were taken from the social network group “Overheard in VSU”¹:

[18] Была у меня группа года 3 назад, очень спокойная, прям очень, у них даже мухи в полете дошли.

I used to teach a group of students 3 years ago, a really calm group, very calm, even the flies died while flying across their class.

[19] Однажды я спросил у своего студента: "Можно ли решить эту задачу в уме?". На что он дал гениальный ответ: "Можно, но не в моем."
Once I asked a student «Is it possible to solve this problem in mind?» The student replied “Yes, but not in my mind”.

[20] Самое главное - правильно сформулировать, что есть случайная величина. Посчитать мат.ожидание за вас может компьютер, ну или ваши рабы.

The main thing here in to correctly formulate what a stochastic value is. You can use a computer or your slaves to count the expectation function.

[21] Иван Сусанин - первый русский туроператор.

Ivan Susanin was the first Russian tour operator.

[22] Раз зайца можно научить курить, то и экономистов можно научить правоведению.

If a hare can be taught to smoke, then students of the Department of Economics can be taught an introductory course in Law.

[23] Девочки, запомните, красота - это страшная сила, красота в

¹ VSU – Voronezh State University, Russia

сочетании с мозгами - убийственная, а вот без мозгов просто страшная.
Girls, remember, beauty is an awful force, beauty coupled with brains is a force that can kill, but without brains beauty is simply awful.

While jokes about professors and students emphasize power imbalance and either support or challenge the existing status hierarchy, writing down humorous utterances and posting them online is a way of creating social cohesion between students and professors. For many university professors, being “overheard” and quoted online is a sign of popularity with their students. For students, the possibility to post professors’ quotations alleviates tension that exists between the two social groups.

4. The Bitter Humour of Scientists: How Big is Your H-index?

The third type of humour outlined in the first section is profession-specific humour, which is best understood by scholars themselves. This category of in-group humour exists in various genres ranging from traditional canned jokes and texts that parody written academic discourse to video parodies and demotivational posters. Profession-specific humour targets topics, which have become commonplace (e.g., low income of Russian professors, poor working conditions or the brain drain) and topics that are relatively new: attempts of Russian officials to estimate academic excellence with quantitative indexes or to reform research institutions so that they were cost-efficient.

The next example targets the poor working conditions and low level of income of researchers in Russia. The plot of the joke involves comparison of two professions, one traditionally considered unintellectual and somewhat despicable, the other – elitist and prestigious.

[24] Сантехник чинит унитаз на дому у профессора. Поработал полчаса, наладил всё и говорит:

– С вас сто долларов.

Профессор начинает возмущаться:

– Я профессор, член-кор академии наук – и то я не получаю сто долларов за полчаса!

Сантехник отвечает:

– Это нормально. Когда я был профессором я тоже столько не получал.

A plumber is repairing a toilet in a professor’s apartment. After half an hour he finishes his job and says to the client:

– You owe me a hundred dollars.

The professor gets angry:

– I am a professor, a member of the Academy of Sciences, but no one pays me a hundred dollars for half an hour work!

The plumber replies:

– It's quite normal, you know. When I was a professor, I wasn't paid that much either.

The joke shows contradiction between traditional social values and financial reward as a measure of success. The amount of money the plumber asks for turns the social hierarchy upside down: the once respected social status of professorship is not supported financially any more.

The low prestige of academic career and poor financing of research projects have resulted in what is traditionally termed as the brain drain. The latter is the target of the following joke:

[25] Объявление: Меняю молодых ученых на престарелых актеров и боксеров. Российская Федерация.

An advertisement in the newspaper classifieds: young scientists are traded for elderly actors and boxers. Russian Federation.

To understand the joke one needs to know that in the past few years a French actor Gérard Depardieu and a professional boxer Roy Jones, Jr. applied for Russian citizenship and were warmly welcomed by Russian officials. Their desire to naturalize in Russia hit the headlines. Gérard Depardieu was presented with apartments in various parts of the country. Unlike these once popular people, young Russian scholars cannot boast such support from the state. As a result, many promising researchers choose to go abroad and continue their academic career in Europe or the USA.

A relatively new topic for humour and irony is the ongoing reform of science and the attempts of bureaucrats to evaluate academic excellence with various quantitative measures. The Hirsch index (or h-index) has become the butt of many jokes.

Since its introduction in 2005, the h-index has been widely used as a measure of productivity of scientists and academic journals. However informative, this index has a number of serious drawbacks, for instance, it can be easily manipulated through self-citation and cross-references. The use of the h-index in modern Russian academic community as the sole official measure of academic excellence has led to the appearance of a series of jokes that mock both the pressure of quantification and authors who manipulate their citation rate. The jokes question the validity and the sheer necessity of measurements of academic excellence. The target of these jokes is something that researchers find disturbing – the introduction

of the h-index as the official measure of academic success revealed low citation rates of Russian academic journals.

[26] – Профессор, как у вас с Хиршем?

– К сожалению, никак. А вот двадцать пять лет назад он был у меня ого-го.

– Professor, how is your “Hirsch” doing?

– Not too well now, unfortunately. But 25 years ago it was a big one!

[27] – А вы знаете, какой у меня Хирш? – запальчиво говорит один ученый муж своему коллеге.

– Наслышан! – отвечает тот ему – Не далее как вчера, ваш Хирш громко обсуждали мои студентки.

– Do you know how big my “Hirsch” is? – a researcher heatedly asks his colleague.

– I’ve heard about it. It was only yesterday that my female students discussed your “Hirsch” very loudly!

[28] – Какой у тебя Хирш, коллега?

– Моя жена довольна!

– А вот мой завлаб не доволен. Говорит, мал у тебя Хирш, Петров.

– How big is your “Hirsch”?

– My wife is quite happy with it.

– Well, the head of my lab is not happy with mine. He says it’s too small.

The jokes above exploit phonetic similarity between the words “Hirsch” and “kher” (pronounced as [her]). The latter is used by speakers of Russian as a euphemism for male genitals. In the jokes, the citation index of a researcher is equated with his sexual activity.

While jokes typically mention the h-index in the context of sexual relations, video parodies mock the practice of artificial increase of the h-index through cross-reference. One of the widely shared parodies is the video taken from an Indian movie (The h-index through the eyes of a humanities scholar 2015). It shows young people dancing to a song of a young couple and the voice over “translates” the text of the song. The text of the parody was written by the researchers of the Laboratory of developmental psychology of the Institute of Psychology RAS. Originally a love song, in the parody it becomes a dialogue between two young researchers. The young man tells the audience that his h-index has grown and he is really happy about it. His is also happy to cite the papers published by a beautiful young girl, but, unfortunately, she never cites his publications. The camera focuses on the girl who tells the listeners that she has cited the works of the young man three times already. The text of translation includes the following chorus: “Oh, the joy of cross-referencing! If you only knew how a researcher with a high h-index

feels! Please, help my h-index grow! I will cite you and you will cite me. And together we will cite our sultan!”

Recent administrative reform of the Russian Academy of Sciences is another topic for the in-group humour. The reform led to creation of a new Federal Agency, one of the tasks of which was to manage the property belonging to the Academy of Science. The public discussion of the reform resulted in the appearance of a series of demotivational posters (or demotivators), most of which explored the images of Professor Preobrazhensky, Shvonder and Sharikov, the characters from Mikhail Bulgakov’s book “Heart of a Dog”. The implication of these posters is quite clear: people who have no experience in research now make decisions about financing research programs. The first poster below is a screenshot from the film “Heart of a dog”. In the film, the new proletarian authorities come to Professor Preobrazhensky’s apartment with the aim to expropriate his property. The demotivational poster in Pic.1 has the following saying: “Professor! We have come to free you from unscholarly function of property management!”



Picture 1.

“Professor! We have come to free you from unscholarly function of property management!”

The second poster is another shot from the film showing drunken Sharikov and two other street beggars sitting in Professor Preobrazhensky's apartment. In the movie, Sharikov uses swear words to invite professor to join them for a drink. On the poster, the first part of the invitation is a straight quotation from the film. However, this time professor is invited to take part in the administrative reform of the Academy of Science.



Picture 2.

“Holy shit, professor! Come here, we are reforming RAS”

Apart from jokes about the h-index, there are many texts that draw their inspiration in professional texts and parody the genres of a journal article or a conference presentation. The parody “On the typology of shoddy research in linguistics” (Sumbatova, 2007) is a perfect example of the ironic pseudo-academic discourse. In her humorous discussion of various strategies of imitating research, Sumbatova follows stylistic requirements of a research paper. Just as in a normal research paper, the introductory paragraph outlines the problem for discussion, offers definition of the notion of “shoddy research” and sets limitations, which are further applied to the research that can be categorized as “shoddy”:

[30] Настоящая работа посвящена широко распространенному среди лингвистов разных школ и направлений явлению халтуры. Сразу оговоримся, что к определению данного понятия существуют различные подходы. Наше рабочее определение относит к халтуре только такие виды научных и псевдонаучных работ, которые заведомо могли быть выполнены автором (авторами) на более высоком уровне, но были выполнены некачественно или не были выполнены вовсе. Для понимания сущности халтуры важно то обстоятельство, что автор халтурной работы пытается представить её как менее или вовсе не халтурную. Таким образом, работы, которые оказались плохими в связи с идиотизмом или случайной неудачей/ошибкой автора, халтурой в нашем понимании не являются (Sumbatova, 2007).

The research is devoted to a phenomenon of shoddy research, which is widely spread among linguists belonging to various research paradigms. We would like to emphasize that there exist different approaches to the definition of this notion. Our working definition includes only those scientific and pseudo-scientific works, which admittedly could be accomplished on a much higher level, but instead they were carried out shoddily or were not carried out at all. To understand the essence of shoddy research it is important to take into account the fact that the researcher actually tries to present her work as not so shoddy or not shoddy at all. Consequently, the works of poor quality which are the results of the author's stupidity or an accidental mistake, in our view, cannot be classified as shoddy work.

The author enumerates and describes various strategies of research imitation adopted by linguists who follow the principle "publish or perish". The next passage is a description of a conference talk or a paper in the "review" genre. The author has fun with a scenario, in which a paper or a conference talk does not contain any new information but instead is based solely on a review of existing points of view:

[31] Работа подменяется обзором подходов к изучаемой теме, желательно с вежливой, но уничтожающей критикой всех. Слушателями молчаливо ожидается, что правильный подход будет предложен автором в конце, но на это не должно остаться времени (листажа). Такой подход требует некоторого знакомства с литературой и тщательного расчета времени. (Sumbatova 2007).

The research is substituted by the review of approaches to the topic. Ideally, it should contain polite but killing critique of everyone. The listeners expect that the right kind of approach will be described at the end of the talk, but the speaker should run out of time (or space). This genre requires familiarity with literature on the topic and precise timing on the part of the speaker.

The gap between the expected and real quality of research becomes the subject

of the writer's creative criticism. The humorous effect lies in the incongruity of the form and the content: by binding the "high" pseudo-academic style with the "low" subject matter – fake research discussed in the text the author spoofs the desire of some scholars to imitate research instead of doing it properly.

5. Conclusions

In modern Russia, humour about scientists and humour produced by scientists is not limited to academic discourse. Jokes about science and scientists exist as socially relevant phenomena: the scenarios of jokes about researchers, types of characters and topics allow us to see how stereotypes about science and scientists are constructed and reflected in communication.

The profession-specific humour is used predominantly in a professional academic community. Various forms and genres of this in-group humour show disjunctions between expectations and actuality. Verbal and visual humour questions the established matter of things and allows the scientists to criticize poor working conditions and the low quality of research. As any other in-group humour, professional academic humour reinforces consensus among researchers by identification of the common problems.

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