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# THE PLACE AND ROLE OF GOD'S NAME IN THE SEMANTIC SCRIPT OF "GOD JOKES"

According to the Bible, a disrespectful use of God's name may be perceived as blasphemous or at least profane. In order to avoid the risk of violating that religious and linguistic taboo, sensitive language users representing the Judeo-Christian world have developed various euphemistic ways of referring to God. On the other hand, however, jokes that include God's name and laugh at him are not uncommon in Western culture. Assuming a linguistic-semantic perspective, the present paper examines a group of "God jokes", which are jokes that contain God's name and were tagged with the word *god* in the collection entitled "The best god jokes", published on the website unijokes.com. The aim of the study is to identify the place and role of God's name in the semantic script of "God jokes", or in other words, to check "how much" God there really is in the text of jokes that are supposed to laugh at God, potentially violating the religious taboo. Following the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Raskin and Attardo 1991; Attardo 2001), the use of God's name is analyzed in the knowledge resources of the semantic script of a joke: the target, the script opposition, the situation, the narration, and the language.

Keywords: God, jokes, semantic script, taboo, religion, knowledge resources

## 1. Introduction

Humor combined with religion may evoke various reactions and the relationships between the two can be characterized by mutual distrust (Saroglou 2002a; Capps 2006). There are scholars who claim that religion and humor are completely incompatible because they exclude each other (Morreall 1983, 2001). As shown by Schweizer and Ott (2016), the category of religion-related jokes may be perceived by believers as improper or blasphemous even if both believers and non-believers may manifest a similar sense of humor. One of the reasons for

that situation may be the fact that some of the jokes that refer to religion use God's name, which belongs to taboo subjects, as the Bible forbids using his name in vain: anyone who does it commits blasphemy and deserves punishment (see Exodus 20: 7).[1]

The aim of the present paper is to examine a group of jokes that mention God understood in the biblical sense and worshipped in Judaism and Christianity. The concepts of Allah from Islam and gods from polytheistic religions like Hinduism are not taken into account. The jokes come from the website unijoke.com, where they have been tagged with the word *god* and published under the title "The best god jokes". It can be assumed that the idea behind that website was to gather jokes that laugh at God. The jokes may partially overlap with the category of "Christian jokes" examined by Hempelmann (2003), who lists God as one of the numerous targets of religious jokes. Nevertheless, the connection between Christianity and the class of "God jokes" analyzed in this paper is neither something expected nor necessary for them to be included in this study. Taking the linguistic-semantic stance, we aim at identifying the place and establishing the role of God's name in the semantic script of those jokes. In other words, the question we ask is "how much" God there is in "God jokes" and where exactly he can be found in this type of humorous text that potentially violates the religious and linguistic taboo on the use of God's name. Thus, following the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Raskin and Attardo 1991; Attardo 2001), the presence of God's name is examined in the following knowledge resources of the semantic script of a joke: the target, the script opposition, the situation, the narration, and the language.

The article opens with a presentation of the relationships between humor and religion. Next, we elaborate on the reasons for taboo concerning God in the Judeo-Christian tradition and then, the focus goes to the role of jokes in the context of taboo subjects. After the theoretical considerations, we analyze the ways in which God's name is used in five knowledge resources of the semantic scripts of the "God jokes" from the website unijokes.com. The study involves an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data.

## 2. Humor and religion

Although the question of religion belongs to the most serious issues in both society and one's personal experience, humor is not absent from that sphere of life. The opinions of scholars on the relationships between humor and religion vary: while, for instance, Morreall (1983; 2001) claims that the two are mutually

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[1] All the biblical references and quotations provided in this paper come from the English translation of Scripture published as the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989).

exclusive, others express the opposite view and argue that humor present in the Judeo-Christian tradition has a redemptive or messianic power (Critchley 2002: 16). As shown by Critchley (2002: 26-27, 42) and Geybels (2011: 14-16), we can find examples of humorous situations, as well as direct references to humor, laughter, and joy, in the Bible. For instance, the positive attitude toward laughter is mentioned in Ecclesiastes 10: 19, which reads: "Feasts are made for laughter; wine gladdens life, and money meets every need". In the Book of Genesis (17: 1-27), we find an explanation for the new names of Abram and his wife Sarai, who now are called by God Abraham and Sarah. As suggested by Critchley (2002: 42), because they laughed at the news that at their age they would have a son, their names are given the onomatopoeic *ha-ha*;[2] also, for the same reason their son is named Isaac, which etymologically means "the one who will laugh" (Genesis 17: 15-19). Friedman (2000: 257-258; 2002: 217) claims that funny wordplays of that kind, which can frequently be found in the Hebrew Bible, aim at mocking idolaters on the one hand, and demonstrating people how to live a good life, based on justice and acts of kindness, on the other.

By a similar vein, also the New Testament attests to the presence of humor and joy in religion. For instance, we can read that Christ teaches his disciples, saying: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15: 11). Although the Bible never says that Jesus laughed or that he never did, humor was present in his words and actions. We can read how Christ takes care for people's good humor when he turns water into wine to keep the merry atmosphere during a wedding party in Cana (John 2: 1-11). It was a miracle that is remembered as the first one performed by Jesus during his public ministry. In another place, Christ is depicted as being ironical in a humorous way in his conversation with people who want to stone an adulterous woman, when he tells them: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8: 1-11).[3] As claimed by Geybels, humor is used by Jesus to communicate important truths in a respectful way: "it is his way to put the restrictive culture He grew up in, in perspective. It is the ideal method of delivering his message without moralizing" (2011: 16). Furthermore, Roberts (1990: 178-186) argues that for a Christian a sense of humor may be a virtue, just like, for instance, gratitude, hope, and compassion. First, thanks to their sense of humor, believers can look at themselves from a distance, discern their imperfections and incongruities between their beliefs and behavior, and in consequence, decide to improve their Christian conduct. Second, humor directed

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[2] However, the official etymology of Abraham's name provided in the Bible is "father of the multitude" (Genesis 17: 5) while Sarah's name means "princess" (Unger and Harrison 2006: 18-20; 1528).

[3] Although not every instance of irony is humor, in Jesus' teaching included in the New Testament the two very often overlap (Jónsson 1985: 177-199).

toward oneself may also become a form of humility, which is something highly valued in the Christian religion.

Unfortunately, despite the possibly redemptive nature of laughter, there are some constraints on the use of humor in religious contexts. Boespflug (2011: 217) notes that "the threshold of tolerance of mockery and blasphemy is never fixed once and for all, but can be renegotiated at any time, like the social bond itself". The problem is that what counts as mockery or blasphemy may change over time and also strongly depends on the context in which it appears. It means that the redemptive power of laughter is not something guaranteed: its therapeutic character always depends on the accurate analysis of the situation in which humor and religion meet, and one needs to be careful not to infringe on the sensitivity of the specific individual or group hearer. For instance, taking the psychological stance, Saroglou (2002b) in one of his studies finds a correlation between humor and a person's attitude toward faith. As his research reveals, people with more conservative and fundamentalist views tend to be more intolerant to humor than those who treat religion with skepticisms and show openness to ambiguity. Another factor influencing one's tolerance to humor may be the theology and teaching of a specific religion or church a person belongs to: while for example, within Christianity, Puritanism showed fear of laughter and condemned fun, punishing people for not being serious enough (Roberts 1990: 177), the Catholic Church canonized people like St. Philip Neri, a sixteenth-century Italian, who was famous for laughing loudly, singing merrily, and playing pranks on various people (Türks 1995).

## 3. God's name as a linguistic taboo in the Judeo-Christian world

The English word *taboo* derives from the Tongan form *tabu*, brought to England by captain James Cook in the eighteenth century. During his visit to Polynesia in 1777, Cook noticed that the indigenous people used the words *tapu* or *tabu*, literally meaning "forbidden", to describe their behaviour toward things that were not to be done, entered, seen, or touched (Allan, Burridge 2006: 2-4). The term *taboo* has become adopted not only in Britain, but in the whole Western civilization to talk about what is prohibited or inappropriate in culture and language. Interestingly, the list of taboo subjects in the contemporary English-speaking world is somewhat ambivalent as it combines the shameful and often disgusting spheres of one's disability, disease, the physiological processes of micturition and excretion, various aspects of sexuality and the sacred sphere of one's religious beliefs, including reverence toward God, worshipped as one's Creator and/or Savior. Douglas (1966: 8) notices that taboos divide what is clean from what is unclean, and in the context of religion it usually means the

separation of the profane, perceived as something impure, from the sacred and holy – in order to protect it from the possible pollution and defilement.

As stated by Allan and Burridge (1991: 37), "taboos on the names of gods seek to avoid metaphysical malevolence by counteracting possible blasphemies (even, perhaps, profanities) that arouse their terrible wrath." Indeed, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the taboo related to using God's name is related to Yahweh's prohibition on the improper use of his name. As we read in the Bible, the moral directive to respect God's name is included in The Decalogue, the fundamental code of conduct for both Jews and Christians, given to Moses on Mount Sion: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name" (Exodus 20: 7). It needs to be noticed that the ban on the misuse of God's name is followed by a warning that no one will be justified for committing such an act. What is more, in another biblical book, God explains to Moses that anyone who blasphemes the name of God should be punished with death: "One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death" (Leviticus 24: 16).

Nevertheless, Allan and Burridge (1991: 36-39) argue that not every misuse of God's name must be an act of blasphemy, which they define as such a use of words that "vilifies or ridicules the deity, the deity's family, or divine mouthpieces like prophets or the priesthood, as well as divine scriptures". Instead, we may deal with a profanity, which uses religious terms, such as the name of the deity, without blasphemous intent, but rather with careless irreverence. Actually, the interpretation of the improper use of God's name depends on the speaker. For instance, as the two authors claim (ibid.), when someone utters the exclamation *Jesus Christ!*, their words will be blasphemous only if the speaker really intends to vilify the person of Christ. Otherwise, they can be perceived as profane, but not necessarily disparaging.

When in need to avoid making references to any of the taboo topics in language, people usually resort to a euphemism, which can be defined as an "alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party" (Allan, Burridge 1991: 11). The notion of *face*, which is used to explain the phenomenon of euphemisms may be defined as one's public self-image (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 212-213). Brown and Levinson (1987: 61-62) distinguish between *the negative face*, which is understood as the need to be independent and free from imposition, and *the positive face*, that is, the need to be connected, to belong and to be a member of a group. In other words, we avoid taboo in language for we wish to follow the principles of politeness in communication, mitigating face-threatening acts that may potentially impose on either the hearer's or the speaker's face. Thanks to euphemisms, we avoid

making ourselves look bad in front of others, which saves our own positive face, express ourselves freely, which saves our negative face, and avoid offending our hearers, which in turn saves their negative face.

In order to minimize the risk of committing an act of profanity or even blasphemy, people have developed a number of euphemistic devices to be applied when there is a need for referring to God, Jesus Christ, or even St. Mary in the Catholic tradition (Allan, Burridge 1991: 36-39; 2006: 1). For instance, the English word *God* is remodeled into *Gosh* or *Golly*, while the word *Christ* becomes *Cripes*. Also clippings are quite common: *Jesus* becomes *Jeeze*, and Hebrew *Yahweh* is clipped to *Yah*, as seen in the common biblical call *Allelu-jah*, meaning "God be praised". Another linguistic technique is the creation of acronyms for the name of God: for example, writing *G-d* instead of *God* or using the abbreviation *IHS*, which comes from the Greek word *ΙΗΣΟΥΣ* (Iesus). Next, there are a number of formulaic expressions in English, which actually omit the name of God*: So help me!, So save us!,* or *Bless you*! Finally, the name of a deity is sometimes replaced with a semantically similar word, like in the case of the word *YHVH* in the Torah, which is traditionally substituted with *Adonai*, meaning "The Lord" or *Ha-Shem*, meaning "The Name", and when using such exclamations as *Goodness!*, *Lord!*, *Heavens!* instead of *God!*, or *Holy mother!* instead of *Holy Mary!*

## 4. Joking about taboo subjects

Humor may play an important role in the way people deal with various taboo subjects. Allan and Burridge write about the application of flippancy as a widely used "means of coming to terms with fear, by downgrading it" (Allan, Burridge 1991: 166). A good example is the topic of death, for which there are a number of humorous expressions in English: *to call it quits, to croak, to check out, to cock up one's toes, to push up the daisies, to buy the farm, to kick the bucket, to pop off, to peg out, to conk out*, to mention just a few. Although such funny descriptions may clash with the seriousness of death, it seems that their euphemistic effect is preserved. In fact, Allan and Burridge's observations concerning those flippant euphemisms for death seem to correspond to the so-called relief theory of humor. As stated by Attardo (1994: 50), humor is said to release psychic tensions in one's mind or even release a person from various laws, conventions, and inhibitions. The relief theory, otherwise known as sublimation or liberation theory, draws on Sigmund Freud's (1960) claims that the energy that is relieved in laughter gives people pleasure because it economizes on energy that would normally be used to repress psychic activity (Critchley 2002: 3; Kuczok, Stwora, Świerkot 2020: 4). Commenting on the relieving power of humor, Norrick (2006: 425) notices that "humor provides a socially acceptable vent for strong emotions toward other people and groups."

Taking the cognitive-linguistic stance, Kövecses (2016: 78) lists the opposition between what is socially unacceptable/stigmatized/tabooed and what is socially neutral/expected/stable among the most common contrasts within the conceptual frame of a joke, leading to its humorous effect. Similarly, Hempelmann (2003: 3-4) notices that in jokes related to taboo, humor reinforces the division between the two spheres that are perceived as separate but now appear together in a joke. That fact makes taboo subjects, including religion, fertile in creating humorous incongruities.

According to Van Herck (2011: 193), the fact that some religious people may be very sensitive to jokes or parodies focusing on religion is related to another of the theories of humor, known as the superiority theory. Attardo (1994: 49-50) points to two famous Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Plato, who agreed that humor has an aggressive aspect to its functionality, and to Thomas Hobbes, who taught that laughter can be and often is used to show hostility, dominance over our hearer, to disparage and deride. In consequence, "jokes about God, about Jesus, about Mohammed, about Buddha and many more divine or sacred figures all balance on the very thin line of the appropriate, as do cartoons, films, paintings, sculptures etcetera in which they appear" (Van Herck 2011: 194). The determining factor deciding about what is acceptable for a hearer and what is not is the context of the specific act of communication: who says what, where, and when.

## 5. Where is God in "God jokes"?

From the semantic point of view, jokes can be characterized as language forms that are built on some kind of incongruity or incompatibility between what is expected by the hearer and what is actually heard (Raskin 1985: 99-100). In line with the revised Semantic Script Theory of Humor (Attardo and Raskin 1991), known as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), it is possible to identify six knowledge resources that are used to create a joke. They include (1) the language used in the joke; (2) the narrative strategy, for instance, a story, a dialogue, or a riddle; (3) the target, that is the butt of the joke: usually a specific person or a group of people we laugh at; (4) the situation described or mentioned in the joke; (5) the logical mechanism, that is the incongruent logic of the joke; and (6) the script opposition, which is the opposition of two possible interpretations of the joke (Attardo 2001: 22-26). That theory can be used to gather both qualitative as well as quantitative data concerning the semantics of jokes.

In order to examine the ways God's name is used in the semantic script of "God jokes" we analyze the jokes from the website titled "The best god jokes" (https://unijokes.com/god-jokes), which contains 189 jokes tagged with the word

*god*. However, a closer analysis of those jokes shows that some of them are listed on the website more than once. There are also jokes that are related to religion, but fail to include a reference to God in their texts. Both these groups of jokes were removed from the studied collection. Additionally, we decided to exclude those jokes that are related to Jesus Christ or use euphemistic references to God, like the word *Lord,* instead of the very word *God*. As a result, the reviewed list contains 136 jokes that include God's name in their texts.

The analysis starts with the target of "God jokes" (5.1) as this knowledge resource in GTVH shows us who the object of the humorous attack is. Next, we present the script oppositions identified in the analyzed jokes (5.2). They make that parameter of the semantic script of a joke which constitutes the most important knowledge resource, determining all the other parameters of a joke (Attardo 2001: 27-28). After that, in the subsequent sections, the identified situations are examined (5.3), and then the narration and language of "God jokes" are discussed (5.4). The parameter of the logical mechanism is not analyzed in this paper as it pertains to the mechanisms of incongruity as such rather than to the semantic content of the joke. Thus, it would not make sense to look for the use of God's name in that knowledge resource.

## 5.1. The targets of "God jokes"

An examination of the targets of "God jokes" reveals that they vary remarkably. In fact, God is the butt of only 8 of those jokes. Interestingly, the biggest group of the jokes with the name of God target women (18 jokes). The other most common targets of those jokes include: men (15 jokes), Chuck Norris, a popular American actor and martial arts artist (15 jokes), atheists (9 jokes), as well as various ethnic and religious groups, such as Blacks (6 jokes), Jews (2 jokes), the Chinese (3 jokes), Gypsies (1 joke), and Catholics (1 joke). Next in popularity are those jokes whose butt is momma (5 jokes), children (5 jokes), blondes (5 jokes), and various professions: lawyers (5 jokes), policemen (1 joke), engineers (1 joke), fishermen (1 joke), dentists (1 joke), doctors (1 joke), prostitutes (1 joke), priests (3 jokes), and nuns (3 jokes). Less common targets include various groups of people: alcoholics (3 jokes), the elderly (2 jokes), sports fans (2 jokes), vegetarians (1 joke), sinners (1 joke), hunters (1 joke), rich people (1 joke), sumo wrestlers (1 joke), hippies (1 joke), and citizens of Las Vegas (1 joke). Then, a few jokes target celebrities, such as Michael Jackson (2 jokes) and Bill Gates (2 jokes), the British Royal Family (2 jokes), and former American president Bill Clinton (1 joke). Apart from that, there is one joke that targets Jesus Christ, and one about detective Sherlock Holmes. Finally, animals are also the butt of some jokes in the examined corpus: cats (2 jokes) and fish (1 joke).

The list provided below presents those 8 jokes from the collection of "God jokes" that are meant to laugh at God.

(1) When I was young I used to pray for a bike, then I realized that God doesn't work that way, so I stole a bike and prayed for forgiveness.[4]

(2) The church is struck by lightning. The insurance company refuses to pay out for damages incurred, as there is a specific disclaimer clause for "An Act of God", which, amongst others, lightning is classified as. The priest goes to every household and asks for a donation to rebuild the church. One Christian farmer protested, "I'm sorry, Pastor, but I can't give money to Somebody who set His own house alight!"

(3) About 4,000 years ago: God: "I shall create a great plague and every living thing on Earth will die!" Fish: *Winks at God and slips him a $20 note* God: "Correction, I shall create a great flood!"

(4) Black holes are where God divided by zero.

(5) Guy comes up the hill, looks up to the sky and yells, "God, I want to hear your opinion! Is Facebook harmful?" And response from heaven, "A moment, I just finish this status."

(6) "And so, God came forth and proclaimed widescreen is the best" Sony 16:9

(7) So God is getting a bit bored in heaven, and he asks his archangel Michael, "Michael, I need to get away from it all for a bit. Where should I go to clear my head?" Michael replies, "Well, you could always go to Pluto. You could go create a mountain and ski, have a bit of fun." God says, "No, I don't think so. I don't do so well with the cold, and frostbite was definitely not one of my better creations." The archangels says, "Alright, well you could always try Mercury. It's nice and warm, you could just take a bit of time to relax, get a nice tan." "Michael," God says, "do you see how white I am? I would burn to a crisp." Michael replies, "Alright, well then why don't you go to Earth?" "Fuck that," God says, "last time I went there I got some girl pregnant and I never heard the end of it."

(8) I know when God becomes angry. When teenage girls get pregnant and their parents exclaim, "Oh God! What have you done?!"

## 5.2. The script oppositions in "God jokes"

The script oppositions that are used in the studied "God jokes" fall into a number of types. The biggest group of 80 jokes are built on the divine vs. human opposition, which involves what is understood as God's behavior

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[4] All the examples of jokes taken from the examined collection retain the original spelling and punctuation.

or activity. This type of script opposition can be seen in jokes (4) and (5) listed in section 5.1 above. In (4) the description of God who creates the universe clashes with the human mistake of dividing something by zero. Joke (5) is based on the incongruity between the image of God who judges people, determining what is good and what is harmful to them, and the picture of God who indulges himself in the use of Facebook as if he were rather a human being with mundane habits.

The next most common script opposition is sex vs. non-sex, found in 23 jokes. This type of contrast may be also found in jokes that target God, as seen in examples (7) and (8) above. In joke (7) there is a clash between the biblical story of St. Mary conceiving Jesus by the Holy Spirit to give birth to the Son of God and a sexual interpretation of that event with God being the physical father of Jesus. Joke (8) in turn is based on the contrast between the situation when a pregnant teenage girl is scorned by her parents who use the exclamation *Oh God!* and the sexual interpretation, in which the exclamation is actually an act of accusing God of making the girl pregnant. It could be expected that the combination of God's name and a topic that has negative connotations or is tabooed, like sexuality, may be responsible for the perception of those jokes by sensitive readers as blasphemous or at best profane.

Then, 11 jokes use the expected vs. unexpected (or normal vs. abnormal) script opposition, in 8 cases it is good vs. bad, and in 7 jokes the opposition is intelligent vs. stupid. The least common script oppositions include actual vs. non-actual (3 jokes), sacred vs. profane (3 jokes), and life vs. death (1 joke).

When it comes to the remaining 4 jokes from the group of the 8 "God jokes" that target God directly, 3 of them are constructed on the good vs. bad script opposition. Joke (1) is based on an incongruity between the vision of the good God that gives his favors to those who pray to him and the "bad God" that does not answer people's prayers. In joke (2) we can see a contrast between the picture of the good God that is worshipped in a church and the picture of the "bad God" that destroys the church – his own home, in a storm called *an Act of God* in law. Joke (3) uses the incongruity between the just God who decides to punish the Earth for people's sins and the corrupted God who accepts a bribe from a fish and changes his decision. Then, in joke (6) we can see the sacred vs. profane script opposition: the sacred character of the text resembles a quotation from the Bible, while its meaning and function is that of an advertisement slogan.

With regard to the other common script oppositions in the analyzed jokes, the expected vs. unexpected opposition can be illustrated with joke (9) below, and the intelligent vs. stupid script opposition is shown in joke (10). The first of the two jokes is based on the contrast between the expected reason of the patient's anxiety, which is the procedure performed by the dentist, and the real reason which is the dentist's stepping on the patient's foot. The other joke uses the clash between the female character thinking that she did something wise when writing down the license plate number and the reality, which shows that her act was

pointless and stupid. Neither of the two jokes targets God: in joke (9) the butt is the dentist, while joke (10) ridicules the so-called blondes.

(9) Dentist (to the patient): "For God's sake, stop making those noises and waving your arms. I haven't even touched your tooth yet." Patient: "Yes, I know. But u're standing on my foot."

(10) Oscar drove his brand new Mercedes to his favorite sporting goods store. He parked it outside and went in to do a little perusing with Jan, his regular sales woman. Jan was a pretty blonde, and as Oscar walked into the store, she happily greeted him. But he requested to look around alone today before he needed her help. She obliged and let him do his thing. Five minutes later, Jan came running up to him yelling, "Oscar! Oscar! I just saw someone driving off with your new Mercedes!" "Dear God! Did you try to stop him?" "No," she said, "I did better than that! I got the license plate number!"

## 5.3. The situations in the script of "God jokes"

The situations described in the semantic scripts of the analyzed "God jokes" include both those that can be associated with religion and God, as well as those that are not connected with any kind of religious activity or aspect of faith. The first group of the religious situations can be found in only 64 jokes out of the total group of the 136 "God jokes". Among them, the biggest number of 30 jokes are based on the biblical story of creation. The next most common situation is going to heaven after death, found in 11 jokes. The other God-related situations encompass prayer (5 jokes), talking to God (4 jokes), life in heaven (4 jokes), a church meeting or service (2 jokes), talking to a priest or preacher (2 jokes), talking about God (2 jokes), and a number of situations identified only in one joke each: confession, going to hell, money collection, the great flood, the Sunday school, and life in the Garden of Eden. Among the 8 jokes that target God, 6 are based on such God-related situations. Thus, joke (1) is about a prayer, joke (2) presents a money collection for the church, joke (3) refers to the great flood described in the Bible, joke (4) is about God creating the universe, joke (5) is a conversation between a man and God, and joke (7) is located in heaven, where God talks to Archangel Michael.

When it comes to the non-religious situations described in the remaining 72 "God jokes", they represent a wide variety of contexts. The biggest groups of those situations include school (5 jokes) and a husband-wife conversation at home (5 jokes). The other situations are: a café or bar (3 jokes), a child/teenager-parent conversation (3 jokes), playing golf (3 jokes), a police inspection of a car (3 jokes), having sex (3 jokes), a man-woman conversation or interaction (3 jokes), flying by plane (2 jokes), shopping (2 jokes), falling into water

(2 jokes), hunting (2 jokes), and a car accident (2 jokes). Then, a number of situations were found in only 1 joke each: in a jail, at the barber's, at the dentist's, at the doctor's, going to sleep, an advertisement, a bus journey, crossing a river, insurance, going to the bathroom, a tornado coming, talking to an atheist, at a hotel reception, talking to a policeman, a wedding, a child-grandfather conversation, at a conference, dying, building an igloo, a bonfire, a water tank, walking in the woods, rowing, walking on water, committing suicide, fishing, changing a lightbulb, the beach, excreting, keeping animals, and camping. The non-God-related situations used in the "God jokes" that target God include an advertisement in joke (6) and a conversation between a teenager and parents in joke (8).

## 5.4. The narration and language of "God jokes"

The group of "God jokes" follow a few types of narration. It is possible to distinguish stories, dialogues, and (pseudo)riddles in their texts. In a few cases, the joke has the form of a single descriptive or conditional sentence. However, what seems to be more interesting in regards to this knowledge resource is rather the way God is depicted in the text of a joke.

In the types of narration used in the examined jokes God appears either as an active character that performs some actions and/or speaks or he is passive in the sense that some other characters talk about God, refer to him, or use God's name in various fixed expressions. The first type of narration can be identified in 56 jokes. All of them are based on scripts that are situated in religious, God-related contexts, listed in section 5.3 above. In the remaining 80 jokes God is not portrayed as an active participant in the script of a joke, but in 40 of them he is mentioned or referred to by the other characters, and in the other 40 jokes the name of God is only the matter of language. The phrases with God's name include exclamations (in 30 jokes), such as (*Oh,) (my) God!*, *Dear God!* used to express the speaker's shock or surprise, *For God's sake,* which shows the speaker's annoyance, as well as *Thank(s) (to) God!* produced to express one's relief. In 10 jokes there are formulaic or fixed expressions, such as *Act of God*, *God's work*, *God bless…*, *God save….*, , *God's gift*, *Son of God*, *Honest to God*, and *God-fearing*.

When it comes to the jokes that target God, he is portrayed as an active character in jokes (3), (4), (5), (6), and (7). God is only talked about in joke (1), and appears in the linguistic formulas: *Act of God* in joke (2) and the exclamation *Oh God!* in joke (8). Additionally, the use of God's name is solely the matter of exclamations in joke (9), which contains *For God's sake!* and joke (10), where we find *Dear God!*. The analysis of the 40 jokes in which God's name appears only in an exclamation or fixed formula shows that in 2 of them God is also the

target, as shown above, in 4 jokes the script opposition is divine vs. non-divine, and in 5 jokes the situation is related to religion. In fact, that leaves 29 jokes – the majority of them – with the name of God being exclusively a matter of linguistic expressions. That case may be illustrated with jokes (9) and (10) provided above: omitting the exclamations *For God's sake!,* produced by the dentist who is annoyed with the patient, and *Dear God!*, used to show the man's shock at the news that his car was stolen, actually would not affect the funny content of those jokes in any way.

Apart from that, it is worth noticing that in 11 "God jokes", God's name co-occurs with vulgarisms. In 4 jokes the words *fuck* or *fucking* are used, including jokes in which God and Jesus Christ themselves swear in this way. In 3 jokes, the word *hell* functions as an expletive, and the other swear words, used only once each, include: *shit, dammit, goddamned*, and *damn*. It might be expected that the juxtaposition of vulgarisms and God's name might be perceived as profane and irreverent. A good illustration of that can be joke (7) listed in section 5.1 or joke (11) provided below. This joke targets priests, although God is an active participant of the story and he is one of the characters that use the vulgar word *fuck*. Interestingly, because of the possibly offensive or maybe also blasphemous character of the text, here that swear word is always spelt with asterisks as *f\*\*k*.

(11) A sailor and a priest were playing golf. The sailor took his first shot missed and said, "F\*\*k, I missed." Surprised, the priest replied, "Don't use that kind of language or god will punish you." The sailor took aim and hit his second shot. Again he missed and under his breath he said, "I f\*\*k'n missed again." The priest overheard and replied, "My son, please don't use that language or god will punish you." The sailor took his third shot and once again he couldn't help mutter, "Oh f\*\*k" The priest said, "That's it god will certainly punish you." Suddenly a bolt of lightning came down and killed the priest. In the distance a deep voice said, "F\*\*K, I Missed."

## 6. Conclusion

As the presented linguistic-semantic analysis of "God jokes" from the unijokes.com website shows, jokes that contain the name of God do not necessarily target God. In fact, that is the case in only 8 out of the 136 examined jokes with God's name. The use of God's name may serve as an element of the semantic script of a joke that helps to laugh at various groups of people or even animals. The range of the possible targets of "God jokes" is really huge and varied, with the most common butts of those jokes being women, men, and Chuck Norris rather than God.

Furthermore, jokes with God's name use various script oppositions: the most common is the divine vs. non-divine opposition, identified in 80 jokes, which make more than a half of the examined collection of "God jokes". It means that exploiting the picture of God, his role in the world, and the assumed behavior is not rare in the creation of humorous scripts of the analyzed jokes, even if they ridicule God only in several examples.

Next, when it comes to the situations mentioned in the scripts of "God jokes", those religion-related ones can be found in 64 jokes, which make less than a half of the studied examples. Those situations range from biblical stories to the afterlife to prayer to various scenes from the church's life. The rest of the jokes build their scripts in situations that are not normally associated with anything religious.

With regard to the narration and language of "God jokes", it turns out that the presence of God's name in their script may be only the matter of fixed linguistic formulas, such as exclamations or other formulaic expressions, which were found in 40 jokes. In most of them, the other knowledge resources of the script show no direct connections or associations with God. It might mean that actually those jokes would still have the same funny effect without the use of God-related language formulas, which appear to be accidental. The irreverent use of God's name might be, however, expected in the combination of God's name and vulgarisms in the same joke, although it happens in only a few cases when it comes to the examined collection.

In the answer to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper – about where God's name is in the semantic script of "God jokes" and what his role is in them – we can say that God can be found in all the five analyzed knowledge resources of those jokes. The knowledge resource that uses God's name most is the script opposition, while he appears least frequently in the target knowledge resource. The roles played by God in the analyzed jokes range from being the actual target of a joke to being included in the divine vs. non-divine script opposition, to becoming part of a situational context of the funny story, to being an active character involved in the narration, to having his name used in some fixed language formulas. However, despite the fact that God's name is present in the semantic script of jokes in various ways, the quantitative data presented in this study leave no doubt that laughing at God and mocking him in the class of "God jokes" is neither something that can be taken for granted nor assumed a priori.

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