A Joke Off-hand: Who Says Jordanians Keep a Straight Face?

Mohammed Farghal
Applied Science Private University, Jordan
Middle East University, MEU Research Unit, Jordan
Jihad M Hamdan
The University of Jordan, Jordan

Abstract: Based on a sample of 75 Jokes extracted from YouTube clips which belong to a comic program called 'A Joke Off-hand', different Jordanian male age-groups are shown to highly welcome, appreciate, and interact with joke telling in public. The topics of jokes are varied, mainly involving hash-addict (26.66%), marriage (16%), body defects (6.66%), and school (6.66%) jokes. The total absence of political jokes and the very few sexual and religious jokes (two instances each) may be ascribed to Jordanians' relatively conservative attitude towards exposing such sensitive themes publically in addition to being aware of censorship as reported by the program's presenter in a TV interview. Jordanian jokes are shown to be influenced by the jokester's age, which is clearly reflected in the structure and sophistication of the joke. In terms of linguistic resources, the bulk of the jokes (85.33%) follows human logical reasoning based on conversational implicature, which can readily travel into English through translation. The remainder of the sample consist of linguistic jokes which defy translation and must be largely annotated if they were to make sense. Word ambiguity and onomastics seem to be a prevalent feature of Jordanian linguistic jokes.

Keywords: joke telling, joke themes, implicature, Jordanians, translatability

1. Introduction

Joking behavior has been studied from different theoretical perspectives. According to relief theorists, e.g. Kant (1790 [1970]), joking is a passive verbal behavior meant to generate relief: an emotional hoax that barks without biting, so to speak. Incongruity theorists (e.g. Willmann 1940; Suls 1972) argue that humor resides in the combining, in one complex whole, of two or more incongruous parts, circumstances, or concepts. Suls (1972) shows that humor comes about as a result of experiencing incongruity between facts and objects but that this combination is immediately made congruous. Thus, humor is the outcome of two cognitive processes: perception of incongruity, and the immediacy of discovering an explanation. For Gestalt theorists, how elements in a joke combine to bring about an overall meaning and the rapid insight by which the meanings of a pattern change seem to be a major concern. For example, Bateson (1953) contends that a joke manifests the characteristics of a paradox. Therefore, it can be regarded as having figure-ground elements: the statement constitutes the figure, while its implications represent the ground, which are usually in conflict, but this conflict is resolved once the message is understood. In Piagetian terms (e.g. McGhee 1971) humor indicates

a cognitive development: in pretending to treat the unfamiliar as familiar and the incongruent as congruent, thus amusement is the outcome of fantasy assimilation of incongruous stimulation. Finally, from a Freudian perspective (Freud 1905/1966), the shifting of emphasis in jokes from the relevant to the irrelevant constitutes the main technique of joking and the enjoyment of humor stems from the appreciation of content describing repressed behavior.

The role jokes play on social and political occasions has also been studied. For instance, Wilson (1979) speaks of two types of ridicule: private ridicule (against self), and shared ridicule (against self, self and others). Both types have a cathartic impact on the individual or community; they play an important role in interpersonal relationships (e.g. Miller 1996; Houston, McKee, Carroll and Marsh 1998; Kuiper and Martin 2010; McLachlan 2022). Joking as verbal behavior, has been examined for different purposes. Psychologists, e.g. Freud (1905 [1966]), have investigated joking for the psychological motives underlying it; linguistic pragmatists, e.g. Leech (1983), and ethnographers, e.g. Sacks (1974), have explored jokes for social and cultural functions they may assume; discourse analysts, e.g. Sherzer (1985), are more interested in the form and structure of jokes; and applied linguists, e.g. Alam (1989) and De Bruyn (1989), have looked into jokes for areas relevant to contrastive studies, e.g. translatability of jokes.

Humor has been approached from a functional and descriptive perspective. The functional approach stresses the socio-psychological aspects of joking behavior (e.g. Benton 1988; Draister 1994). The descriptive approach, by contrast, foregrounds semantic and structural properties of joke-telling (e.g. Goldstein, 1970; Raskin, 1985; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 2001; Arab and Davies 2022). Despite the difference in orientation, there is a general agreement among humor researchers that joking, which typically results in laughter, is essentially an intentional act that evolves from both the jokester and the joke itself, and is expected to be of interest to the interlocutor, who usually becomes a key player once the joke has been told. It remains true, nonetheless, that meaning is never made explicit in jokes – it is usually worked out co-operatively by the joke teller and the listener through conversational implicature (Grice 1975; Attardo 1993; Farghal and Shakir 1993; Farghal 2006) in a non-bona fide manner of communication (Raskin 1985) and relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1981, 1986; Yus 2016). More often than not, the jokester flouts one or more of the maxims of conversation, in order to create more interest and suspense in their joke. In terms of structure, Hockett (1972) states that the joke has three parts: the buildup, the pivot, and the punch line. More convincingly and economically, Sherzer (1985) views the joke as a discourse unit consisting of two segments: the setup and the punch-line. The setup sets the scene and presents the content of scenario and the punch-line represents the climax where the butt is hit and laughter is created.

2. Corpus
The corpus of this study consists of 75 Arabic jokes which are taken from a comic Jordanian program called نكتة علماشي 'A Joke Off-hand'. The jokes are viewed and written down by the researchers over a period of one month as they are orally told

on YouTube video clips. In the clip, the program presenter (Bakri Al-Harasis/a Jordanian actor) greets the informant and introduces his program by giving its name before asking them to tell a joke. The informants in the corpus are exclusively males who belong to different age groups (children, adults, and the elderly). The exclusion of females in this program is due to the conservative nature of Jordanian society, i.e. it would be considered taboo and offensive to ask a Jordanian girl/woman publically to tell a joke. As things appear in the clips, all the informants welcomed the idea to tell jokes and soon started to crack jokes in a very friendly atmosphere, which usually ended in hilarious laughter from both parties (the presenter and the jokester), in addition to bystanders in several cases, upon reaching the punch-line of the joke.

One should note that the informants' readiness to engage in humor and their amiable mood in telling jokes run counter to the often-heard stereotype in Arab circles that Jordanians usually keep a straight face and disfavor joking behavior. On a TV interview (Amman TV, 20 September 2022), Al-Harasis (the presenter) was at pains trying to dismiss this stereotype by explaining to his two hostesses how willing and enthusiastic the informants were when they were approached and asked to tell jokes, contrary to common beliefs about Jordanians. He also said that the jokes were recorded rather than broadcast live and pointed out that religious and political jokes were not allowed. Some statistics about the viewing of the program were also given during the interview: one video had 13 million views, TikTok shows 1 million views, and YouTube shows hundreds of thousands views.

3. Research questions
The study attempts to answer the following research questions:
1. How are jokes distributed among the three age groups (children, adults, and the elderly)?
2. What topics are addressed in Jordanian joking behavior?
3. How is a Jordanian joke structured?
4. What linguistic resources are employed in Jordanian jokes?
5. How translatable are Jordanian jokes into English?

4. Analysis and discussion
4.1 Distribution and nature of jokes among age-groups
The distribution of the jokes in the corpus among the three age groups is as follows: children (28%), adults (61.33%), and the elderly (10.66%). On the one hand, the finding that young and adults have the lion's share is expected because they are the most likely group to engage in joking behavior, being open-minded and less conservative than other age groups. Conversely, the elderly are more conservative and less likely to engage in telling jokes. The program presenter is apparently aware of such concerns, hence the low percentage of elderly informants. Finally, the percentage for children may indicate that they are more accessible and approachable than the elderly, in addition to being curious and less aware of social constraints.

When it comes to the type of jokes told by the three age groups, the tendency for children's jokes is to be one-liner jokes/riddles, whereas the jokes of young and

adults and the elderly are more elaborate and mature. The following are three jokes representing the three age groups (All English translations in this paper are ours):

1. Once, a hen drank boiled water, it laid a boiled egg.   (Child)
2. Once, a hash-addict came back home with a cat. His wife opened the door for him. He asked, "What do you think of this cow?" His wife responded, "Come on! This is a cat". He retorted, "I'm talking to the cat, not you!" (Adult)
3. Once, a young man went to ask for a girl's hand. The girl's father asked him, "What do you do for a living?" He replied, "I'm a manager of a large company and have a monthly salary of four thousand dinars. I also have a brand new luxury car". "What about your morals?" the father asked. "All perfect – praying, fasting, and everything. However, I have a small problem – I'm a liar".   (Elderly)

As can be observed, the child's joke in (1) above is a one-liner and it lacks sophistication, cf. the simple and immature association between 'the hen drinking boiled water' and 'laying a boiled egg', which is something expected from children given their evolving cognition. The laughter created from telling such jokes is more due to the fact that they are told by children than to the funny nature of the joke. By contrast, the adult jokes in (2) and (3) are more elaborate and more loaded with conversational implicature (Grice 1975). In (2), for example, the comprehension of the joke depends entirely on figuring out the conversational implicature that the 'cow' meant the 'wife'. If this joke were told to a child, it would most likely escape them.

There are a few cases where adults opt for one-liner jokes, but with a sophistication level that may escape children. The following jokes are illustrative:

4. Why is wood an orphan? Because it is cut off a tree.   (Adult)
5. Why does a lion say meow? Because it's not an adult, yet.   (Elderly)
6. A donkey is braying while closing its eyes. Why? Because it has learned to do so by heart.   (Adult)

Despite being one liners, the jokes in (4)-(6) demonstrate an adult mentality. In (4), there is wordplay on the Arabic idiomatic expression مقطوع من شجرة 'cut off a tree', which means that the referent has no parents and relatives, hence the comic relation established between 'wood' and 'orphan'. In (5), the humor comes from establishing a relationship between 'speech' and 'adulthood' in animals. Thus, a lion is compared to a pussycat in producing sounds before becoming an adult biologically, just like a child in his journey to what is called بلوغ 'biological adulthood'. Finally, the funny riddle in (6) is based on a complex relationship between 'closing eyes', 'producing instinctively learned sounds', and 'learning by heart' applied to the braying of a donkey, viz. *Is braying something to be learned by heart*, and *Does closing one's eyes imply learning something by heart?* Such one-liners seem to delve deep into cognitive and linguistic resources to improvise humor, unlike the child's one-liner in (1) above.

Still, there are few cases in which children's jokes reveal a level of sophistication that resembles adult mentality, as can be illustrated in (7) and (8) below:

7. Once, a person with Alzheimer laughed; they forgot their mouth was open.   (Child)
8. Once, a Tafeeli [a person from Tafeela, a city in Southern Jordan often targeted by jokes] went to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage. He was caught in a ladies' bathroom. When questioned, he said "What's the problem? I'm performing the pilgrimage on behalf of my mother". (Child)

As can be seen, although they are told by children, (7) and (8) involve a high level of sophistication. The humor in the former is based on technical medical knowledge, i.e. people suffering from Alzheimer forget things, while the latter delves deep into religious knowledge in order to improvise humor, i.e. because a man is performing the pilgrimage on behalf of a woman, he is permitted to use the ladies' bathrooms. It should be noted that these two jokes were told by children who are approaching adulthood rather than by adults.

4.2 Topics addressed in the jokes

The themes that are revealed in Jordanian jokes are varied. However, there is a total absence of political jokes in the corpus, which results from the program's censorship rather than the degree of freedom of expression which in practice allows criticism of all political levels in Jordan with the relative exception of the royal family. For example, Jordanians' social media materials that commonly poke fun at government officials' performance bear witness to this (see Al-Momani, Badarneh and Migdadi 2017; Hussein and Aljamili 2020; Elsayed 2021). The following table shows the topics addressed in the corpus:

Table. Topics addressed in the jokes

Name of topic	Frequency	Percentage
Hash-addicts	20	26.66
Marriage	12	16
Body defects	5	6.66
School	5	6.66
Food	2	2.66
Money	2	2.66
Illness	2	2.66
Sex	2	2.66
Religion	1	1.33
Mixed bag	24	32

4.2.1 Hash addict jokes

Apart from the mixed bag, the topic that shows the highest percentage (26.66%) with 20 occurrences in the corpus is hash-addicts. Hash consumers are fertile ground for *non-bona fide* communication in general and joking behavior in particular because their sound reasoning is largely minimized due to drug consumption. It may be assumed that this high percentage reflects a subconscious

concern about the increasing consumption of drugs by adults in Jordanian society, especially following the recent instability the region. For example, the Jordanian Anti-drug Department documented 12,815 drug cases in the period between 1st January 2021 and 30th August 2021.

Such jokes involve propositions that run counter to sound reasoning. However, they are funny by presenting unexpected scenarios which reflect the reasoning of someone who has lost their mind due to drug use, but who can still make sense in a special and hilarious manner. Notably, all the hash-addict jokes in the corpus refer to males, perhaps because of the patriarchal nature of Jordanian society and/or the taboo nature of drug use, which is more fitting a subject for males than for females. They are also told mainly by young and adults and, to a lesser extent, by children, rather than the elderly, which may have to do with the sensitivity of the topic. The following are two illustrative examples:

9. Once, a hash-addict was appointed principal of a school for abandoned and orphaned children. On his first day at work, he called for a parents' meeting. (Child)
10. Once, a hash-addict asked for a girl's hand. The girl accepted his marriage proposal, but he went back on it, saying: "Since she accepted my proposal, she would accept someone else's too". (Adult)

As can be observed, the two jokes in (9) and (10) involve two unexpected punch-lines, which only 'make sense' in the world of drug use, where sound reasoning is lost but there is room for funny scenarios. The hash-addict principal in (9) called for a parents' meeting in a school in which the students have no parents (they are orphaned), while in (10), the hash-addict quitted a deal for fear that someone else would have accepted it. Such scenarios which represent fallacious reasoning are an inherent feature of reasoning in hash-addict jokes and usually give rise to hilarious laughter from all parties involved.

4.2.2 Marriage jokes
The topic of marriage comes second (16%) with 12 instances in the data. Marriage constitutes a common target for joking in Jordan, and it overlaps with hash-addict jokes several of which involve marriage issues (10 above, for example). Interestingly, marriage jokes in the corpus are told by all the three age-groups, which indicates the subject's insensitivity to the jokester's age because it involves varied features that can fit all age groups. The following examples are illustrative:

11. Once, a person asked his friend, "What dangerous hobbies do you have?" His friend answered, "I talk to my wife while she's nervous". (Child)
12. Once, a wife said to her husband, "Honey, do what our neighbor Saeed does every morning! He kisses his wife before going to work". Her husband replied, "Do you think she'll agree?" (Adult)
13. Once, a man went to ask for a girl's hand and he sat with her father, while chewing gum. The father asked him to stop chewing gum, to which he replied "I only chew gum after I smoke". "O, you smoke!" the father exclaimed. "Only after a glass of whisky', he commented. "Come on! You also drink!" the father further exclaimed. "Only when I gamble", the man

said. "Also, you gamble!" exclaimed the father. "Only since I came out of prison", the man replied. "O, you were in prison, as well?" the father retorted. "Yes, because once I went to ask for a girl's hand and her father rejected me", the man replied. The father concluded, "Well, then, you've got a deal".   (Elderly)

In (11), the child's joke dwells on the stereotypically strained relationship between husband and wife to the extent that a husband's talking to his wife while she is nervous is depicted as a dangerous act. This theme is taboo-free and is fit for children. By contrast, the adult joke in (12) involves sexual implications that are not fit for children and may go beyond the limits of their cognition. More striking when it comes to the maturing cognition of children is the humor in (13), in which there is reference to several adult bad habits (smoking, drinking, gambling, and imprisonment) that are not likely to occur in children's jokes. Note that the hash-addict jokes are an exception here because of their popularity among all age groups in Jordan.

The degree of subtlety of the humor in (11) on the one hand and that of (12) and (13) on the other is largely different. The humor in (11) is based on standard conversational implicatures and a relatively high degree of relevance, viz. a husband viewing his wife's nervousness as a danger to stay away from. By contrast, the humor in (12) and (13) derives from particularized conversational implicatures (floutings) and lower degrees of relevance (for more on implicature theory and relevance theory, see Grice 1975 and Superber and Wilson 1986, respectively). Therefore, more cognitive effort is needed to process the humor in (12) and (13) than in (11). By way of illustration, let us examine the father's punch-line خلنا طيب نقرأ الفاتحة 'Well, let's read the *fa:tiħa* (the opening *sūrah* in Quran), which signals approval of a deal (the marriage proposal here)'. This punch-line standardly implicates approval of the marriage proposal but, more subtly, flouts the quality maxim by conversationally implicating the father's being forced into this deal out of fear that the man would kill him the way he had done with the girl's father in his previous rejected marriage proposal. This is also something conversationally implicated rather said (for more on conversational implicatures and the pragmatics of Arabic jokes, see Farghal 1992, 1993, 2006).

4.2.3 Body defect and school jokes
Third come 'body defects' and 'school' as target themes in the data, with 5 instances (6.66%) each. The body-defect jokes are all told by young and adults and target cross-eyed people, which is a common joking theme in Jordan. The jokes are usually phrased out as one-liner, light jokes fictionally depicting funny acts resulting from a person's being cross-eyed. The jokes in (14)-16 below are cases *par excellence*:

14. Once, a cross-eyed man set a mattress on the ground – and lay down to sleep beside it.
15. Once, a cross-eyed man was asked about the main wish in his life. He responded, "To see a person walking alone".

16. Once, a cross-eyed man remarried – the bride turned out to be his ex-wife.

As for the jokes relating to school, they are usually critical of the educational system in a humorous manner. Below are three example jokes told by the three age groups:

17. Once, a geography teacher's daughter got lost. The teacher looked for her on the map. (Child)

18. Once, a teacher asked his pupils, "What do we get from a lamb?" They answered "Wool". "From a hen?" "Eggs", the answer came. "From a donkey?" he further asked. With one voice, the pupils shouted, "Lessons!" (Adult)

19. Once, a mother asked her son, "What did you get in your school tests today?" "Ten", he responded. "How is that?" she inquired. "Three in math, three in English, and four in Arabic", he explained.   (Elderly)

As can be observed, if we exclude the child's joke in (17), which may be interpreted as creating humor without social criticism, the adult jokes in (18) and (19) combine humor with severe criticism of the educational system in Jordan. In (18) and (19), school teachers are negatively portrayed as not doing their job properly, in (18) by asking naïve questions and in (19) by not getting good outcomes from their teaching as is reflected in the students' low marks.

4.2.4 Food, money, and illness jokes

Food, money and illness jokes occur twice each (2.66%), which is to be expected as they are not as familiar themes for humor as hash-addict or marriage jokes. Below are three illustrative examples:

20. Once, a Zinger, a burger, and a shawerma were running. Why? Because they are all fast food.   (Child)

21. Once, a father asked his son: Do you choose brains or money? "Money, of course", the son answered. "Why?", asked the father. "Because everyone chooses what he lacks", the son replied.   (Elderly)

22. An ill person was lost. He asked someone about the shortest way to a hospital. "Cross the road while closing your eyes", the person answered. (Adult)

The child's food joke in (20) is a funny riddle, which exploits polysemy to create humor, i.e. *fast* may refer to 'speed' in running as a physical act and 'speed' in preparing food, the first of which is applied humorously to an instance of the second. The money joke in (21) aims to humorously show how important money is, especially when it is badly needed. Thus, needed money in this case should be given priority over brains (intelligence), which are an intrinsic possession, the funny son's logic goes. Finally, the illness joke in (22) creates humor by calling up a funny scenario that would take the ill person to a hospital, not by giving him directions to the closest hospital using sound logic, but by telling him to cross the road with closed eyes. The humorous message is that the sick person would be run over by a vehicle, after which they would be immediately rushed to a hospital, in an abnormal, funny compliance with the request.

4.2.5 Sex and religion jokes

The data shows only two sex jokes (2.66%) and one religion joke (1.33%). Sexuality is a familiar target for jokes in Jordan and elsewhere in the world (Farghal 1992, 1993; Hemmasi and Russ 1994, 1998; Crawford 2000; Angelone, Hirschman, Suniga, Armey and Armelie 2005; Brunner and Costello 2022, among others). However, the low percentage of sexual jokes in the corpus may have to do with the fact that these jokes are told in public and will be broadcast on different media, including YouTube from which this corpus is collected. Therefore, one can imagine the informants' avoiding telling sexual jokes on a public program in a generally conservative community, in addition to the program's censorship. Nonetheless, two such jokes (one by an adult and the other by an elderly) occur in the data, as can be illustrated below:

23. Once, a man and his wife went to buy furniture for their bedroom. The salesman was trying hard to convince the wife to buy a certain bed, but she kept telling him that it wouldn't work. "Why?" he asked. "I want a higher one", she responded. Then, he told her to lie on it. She did and asked him to lie beside her. At that moment, the husband who was answering a phone call in the yard, appeared. She immediately tried to hide under the bed, but it didn't work. She yelled at the salesman, "Didn't I tell you it wouldn't work?"   (Adult)

24. Once, a man went to consult a doctor. He explained, "On the first, my legs pain me. On the second, my knees crack. On the third, my sides go numb. On the fourth, my shoulders go numb. On the fifth, my neck freezes". Surprised, the doctor said, "Take mercy on yourself! What are you saying: four, five, six?" "I live on the sixth floor, doctor", the man replied. (Elderly)

Both these jokes convey sexual connotations by way of conversational implicature. In (22), the punch-line "Didn't I tell you that it wouldn't work?" conversationally implicates that the woman had betrayed her husband using the same trick (having her partner hide under the bed) before by flouting the maxim of quantity (by being under-informative). Similarly, the punch-line "I'm living on the sixth floor, doctor" resolves the misunderstanding created by flouting the maxim of manner through the use of ambiguous utterances that could be interpreted as referring to sexual activity.

As for religion, this is not a familiar target for humor, especially when this is done publicly on a program, because of its sensitivity in a conservative country like Jordan. In addition, humor in Abrahamic religions, of which Islam is a major one, is ill-regarded (see Adkin 1985; Gilhus 1997; Saroglou 2002). In fact, abuse of religion through humor in Jordan is a criminal act that can lead to imprisonment, or worse. The only joke that explicitly depicts a religious theme is said by a child. It is free of blasphemy; it targets a subcultural Jordanian group familiarly figuring in jokes which reflect naivety/stupidity (people from Tafeela in southern Jordan).

25. Once, a Tafeeli went to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage. He was caught in a ladies' bathroom. When questioned, he said "What's the problem? I'm performing the pilgrimage on behalf of my mother".

4.2.6 Mixed-bag

The mixed-bag category (24/32%) features a large variety of individual cases that defeat thematic categorization. One-liner riddles dealing with different topics account for 11 mixed-bag instances (45.83%). Below are representative examples:

26. If the Earth revolved thirty times a day, what would happen? We'd get our salary every day!   (Child)
27. There is a stone hiding. Why? Because it hit someone on the head. (Adult)
28. A person went to the movies but didn't see the film. Why? He shook hands with all the people there. [The implication is that he was busy throughout the show shaking hands with all people in the hall and thus was not actually watching.]   (Elderly)

The rest of the jokes in the mixed-bag category involve one-liners with only one longer text, as can be illustrated below:

29. Once, a worm fell into a macaroni dish. It shouted, "What a jam!"   (Child)
30. Once, a ħadʒdʒi [an old woman pilgrim] fell on the stairs. She asked her children, "How was the move?"   (Adult)
31. Once, a man was playing cards with a donkey. Someone passing by him exclaimed, "How come you are playing cards with a donkey!" Passing by him again after six hours, the man asked, "You are still playing cards with the donkey?" "You won't like it!" he responded. "The donkey's beaten me eight times so far".   (Elderly)

Note that the joke in (30) features a culture-bound title of address ħadʒdʒi (literally 'a female pilgrim), which is mainly used as a relational rather than an absolute social honorific (Farghal 1994). This honorific is employed in Jordan (and probably in many Arab countries) to address an old woman who may or may not be a real pilgrim (someone who has performed the pilgrimage duly in Mecca, Saudi Arabic as one of the five pillars of Islam). That is why a parenthetical note would be needed in translation to explain its sociolinguistic implications. An approximation like 'an old woman' would miss out such essential information.

5. Structure of Jordanian Jokes

As recognized universally (Sherzer, 1985), the Jordanian joke is comprised of a set-up and a punch-line. The set-up features a routine joke opener and details which lead to a punch-line. The prototypical joke opener is مرّه واحد *marra wa:ħad* 'Once someone (a male)'/مره وحده *marra waħadi* 'Once someone (a female) or فيه واحد *fi: wa:ħad* 'there was someone (a male)'/فيه وحده *fi: waħadi* 'there was someone (a female), which may be shortened to واحد *wa:ħad* 'someone (a male)'/وحده *waħadi* 'someone (a female)', especially in riddle jokes. In some cases, the jokester may do away with the routine joke opener and starts their joke right away. The vernacular joke openers may be considered the counterparts of the Classical Arabic version في قديم الزمان والمكان *fi: qadi:mi zzama:n wal-maka:n* 'Once upon a time and a place', which may be used appropriately only in rarely occurring formal joke settings. One should note that the masculine vernacular general opener *marra waaħad* 'Once,

someone (a male)' is much more frequently employed in the corpus than the feminine *marra waħadi* 'Once, someone (a female)' when referring to people (47 instances are masculine, while only 3 instances are feminine), a finding which may point to the patriarchal nature of the Jordanian society. However, when the referent is [- human], it must be lexically specified and the subsequent choice between masculine and feminine in gender agreement depends on the noun's grammatical gender, e.g. دودة 'a worm' is feminine, while صرصور 'a roach' is masculine. Following are examples illustrating the above points:

32. *marra wa:ħad* (once someone [a male]) asked his friend, "What dangerous hobbies do you have?" His friend answered, "I talk to my wife while she's nervous".

33. *fi: wa:ħad* (there [was] someone [a male] with Alzheimers, who laughed: he forgot his mouth open.

34. *waħadi* (someone [a female]) said to her husband, "Honey, do what our neighbor Saeed does every morning! He kisses his wife before going to work". Her husband replied. "Do you think she'll agree?"

35. A hash-addict whose wife was giving birth was asked what name he would give to his baby boy. He said, "Papa, after my father's name".

36. *marra* (once) a roach got dressed up. Why? Because it was going to the *Abdoun* [a posh area in Amman] sewers.

37. Do you know the elevator joke? No! Nor do I! I was using the stairs.

The examples in (32)-(37) represent different routine joke opener options. In (32) and (33), the variation has to do with the choice between *marra wa:ħad* and *fi: wa:ħad* as prototypical joke openers. In (34), the opener is shortened to *waħadi* instead of the full *marra/fi: waħdi*. The joke opener in (35) is done away with. The two riddles in (36) and (37) represent the options with and without an opener, respectively. Note that when the riddle joke starts with a question, a joke opener cannot be used (37). However, when a riddle joke starts with an opener, the opener may be omitted. For example, the riddle joke in (36) may be said without an opener as in (38) below:

38. A roach got dressed up. Why? Because it was going to the *Abdoun* [a posh area in Amman] sewers. [صرصور لَبِس أحسن ما عنده. ليش؟ عشان رايح عمجاري عبدون]

In terms of translation, all the versions of joke openers may be approximated to 'once' in English. Depending on the joke, the indefinite pronoun *wa:ħad/waħadi* 'one' might be translated as 'a person' to sound natural in English and to avoid gendered pronouns. If the co-text implies the gender of the referent, it needs to be spelled out. For example, the indefinite pronoun 'one' in 'Once, one asked his wife' should be rendered as 'Once, a man asked his wife' [مرّة واحد سأل مرته]

As for the details which progressively lead to the punch-line, these range between including one detail in a riddle joke (e.g. 35 above) and several ones in a longer joke (e.g. 34 above). In some cases, many details are used together to create prolonged suspense (often in a dialogic form) in preparation for the punch-line (what Hockett 1972 calls the 'pivot' of a joke, in addition to a 'build-up and a

'punch-line). The following is a good example of such jokes (the jokes in (3) and (13) above are also good examples):

    39. Once, a son asked his father to give him 5,000 dinars to enable him to travel to the US. The father said, "I don't have that amount". "I know you do. It's there in the closet", the son retorted. Then, he beat his father up and took the money. Two months later, the father received 50,000 dinars from his son with this note: I'm so sorry for having beaten you up, dad! The father wrote back to him, "Don't worry, sonny! I knew you beat me up for my own good".

As can be observed, the joke creates suspense in a dialogic form between the son and his father. The son's beating his father up violates social norms in Jordan and the world at large regardless of any imaginable reason. However, these norms may allow a father to beat his son up to discipline him. Had the joke stopped at this point, it would not have created the de ot "sired humor and the listener(s) might have responded with a remark like, "What a silly joke!" or "This is not a joke!" That is why the joke continues with more suspense created until a punch-line is about to be uttered regarding the father's receipt of 50,000 dinars in compensation from the 5,000 dinars his son took from him by doing a socially unacceptable act. Finally, the punch-line comes as a surprise – money so exceeds anything else in value that morality becomes marginal when pitted against it. In this way, the elaborate set-up (Sherzer 1985) is crucial for developing the joke effectively towards the punch-line, which gives rise to hilarious laughter. The punch-line has to be brief, witty, and shockingly unexpected in order for the joke to accomplish its objective in creating humor and, as in this case, teaching a moral.

6. Linguistic resources and translatability of Jordanian jokes

The bulk of the linguistic material in Jordanian jokes 64/75 (85.33%) in this study follows logical reasoning and can readily travel between different cultures in translation. This simply means that the *none-bona fide* manner of communication can be correctly interpreted using rational thinking based on conversational implicature (Grice 1975) and optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1981, 1986). Such jokes can readily travel between languages through good translation. The following examples are illustrative:

    40. A person went to the movies but didn't see the film. Why? He shook hands with all the people there.

    41. Once, a wife said to her husband, "Honey, do what our neighbor Saeed does every morning! He kisses his wife before going to work". Her husband replied, "Do you think she'll agree?"

    42. Once, a teacher asked his pupils, "What do we get from a lamb?" They answered "Wool". "From a hen?" "Eggs", the answer came. "From a donkey?" he further asked. With one voice, the pupils shouted, "Lessons!" (Adult)

As can be observed, the jokes in (41)-(42) do not feature culture-bound items; hence they are thought to be understood based on general universal reasoning and are assumed to travel well through good translation, e.g. into English. However, an

anonymous reviewer suggested that there are also more general issues of what kind of jokes people find funny in different cultures; i.e. a joke which does not contain culturally specific elements may not be thought funny in another language/culture, because the speakers of that other language (members of that other culture) simply do not find that kind of joke funny.

Now we turn to the following translation-related joke, which, we believe, can be readily rendered into most languages, including English, as below:

43. A man went into to a butcher's shop, where there was a cat meowing. "Give it half a kilo of meat", he said to the butcher. The cat ate it and meowed again. The man said, "Give it another half a kilo". The cat ate it and felt full. The man began to leave but the butcher stopped him, saying "Pay me for the meat you got for the cat". "Why should I? I was just translating for you", the man protested.

In some cases, however, a culture-bound item may need a parenthetical note in order for the joke to make sense. Following is an example which was entertained earlie

44. Once, a *Tafeeli* (a person from Tafeela, a city in Southern Jordan often targeted by jokes) went to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage. He was caught in a ladies' bathroom. When questioned, he said "What's the problem? I'm performing the pilgrimage on behalf of my mother".

Note that the culture-bound items require parenthetical notes in order to render the jokes comprehensible and humorous in English.[1] Some jokes may even be sensitive to some sociolinguistic notes to improve the comprehensibility of the humor in them, e.g. jokes relating to the social norm of asking for a girl's hand (3 and 13 above), something which is customarily solicited from the girl's father and which may look strange to members of other cultures, particularly adults[2] or the normal kind of relation between father and son (39 above). However, this may not block comprehensibility and/or translatability (for more details about the sociolinguistics of Jordanian jokes, see Al-Khatib, 1999).

Apart from the above, there are some key linguistic resources that occur in improvising Jordanian jokes, including word ambiguity, onomastics, and idiomatic expressions which, on occasions, may block comprehensibility and translatability into other languages. In addition, there is borrowing as a linguistic resource which may affect comprehensibility within the source language rather than translatability into the target language.

Word ambiguity lies at the heart of improvising joking behavior in human language in general (Hockett 1972; Pepicello and Weisberg 1983; Kao, Levy and Goodman 2016, among others). Jordanian jokes are no exception, as can be illustrated by the examples in (45) and (46):

45. Once, a man didn't grow/discipline his beard. It became loose.
46. Once, a person filed a suit. It fell on him.

As can be noted, neither (45) nor (46) is comprehensible in English because both are based on humorous word ambiguity in Arabic. Therefore, such linguistic jokes challenge translatability. In (45), the humor in Arabic stems from the fact that the word ربّى *rabba:* has two senses: 'to grow' and 'to discipline', hence the linguistic

humor in Arabic, i.e. the funny incongruity between *rabbaa* in the sense of 'to grow' and that of 'loose (immoral)', which calls up *rabba:* in the sense of 'to discipline'. In (46), the humor derives from using the ambiguous Arabic word رفع to mean 'to file (a suit)' and 'to lift (an object)' in two incongruous scenarios by humorously interpreting the second scenario in terms of the first one, thus producing the comic reading in Arabic, but the incomprehensible notion of 'the suit falling on him' in English.

An extension of lexical ambiguity is onomastic jokes whose humor derives from employing an ambiguous Arabic item that functions as a personal name and a common noun at the same time, e.g. ندى *nada:* 'Nada *female name* and dew' and وعد *waʕid* 'waʕid *female name* and promise'. Such jokes defy comprehensibility and translatability in English, as can be witnessed in (47) and (48) below:

47. One day, a girl named Nada sat beside a stove. She evaporated.
48. Once, a hash-addict asked a girl for her name. She answered, "*waʕid*". "I swear by God I won't tell anyone!", he replied. [Actually, the ambiguity resides in using a rising intonation as if she was asking for a promise (a yes/no question) not to release her name once told rather than stating her name which requires a falling intonation.]

As can be observed, the translations above do not make sense because in both cases we have personal names that also mean 'dew' and 'promise' respectively, in order to improvise humor based on the fact that many personal names can also function as common nouns in Arabic. This ambiguity cannot be replicated in the English translation. In this context, an anonymous reviewer suggests that (47-48) and the like could be translated "using a so-called 'virtue name', i.e. a word whose basic meaning is a virtue, but which then came to be used (particularly originally by Puritans) as a (female) proper name: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue_name. A few such virtue names are still used in English, e.g. the girls' names Constance, Patience and Grace". The reviewer added that if 'Promise' was generally known in English as a girl's name (it isn't), one could translate (48) along the lines:

49. One day, a hash-addict asked a girl for her name. "Promise", she answered. "I swear I won't tell anyone", he replied.

There is one case where the Arabic humor in a riddle joke stems from a humorous manipulation of the meaning of an Arabic idiomatic expression:

50. Why is wood an orphan? Because it is cut off a tree.

The Arabic idiomatic expression مقطوع من شجرة 'cut off a tree' refers to a person who is stranded on their own with no parents and relatives. Through personification of wood as 'orphan', the joke presents it humorously as 'cut off a tree' by calling up the literal sense, i.e. the fact that wood comes from trees. That is why this humor challenges comprehensibility and translatability in English. When the joke is unpacked the way it is here, the humor evaporates. Unlike reasoning-oriented humor, linguistic humor, which includes word ambiguity, onomastics, and idiomatic expressions in this study, is untranslatable into English insofar as the preservation of humor and funniness is concerned.

Finally, there are a few jokes in the corpus in which the jokester borrows some key terms from English (see also Salem. Jarrrah and Alrashdan 2020). Below are two illustrative examples:

51. One day, a hash-addict went to a KFC restaurant. He came out laughing his head off. When asked why, he replied, "I ripped them off. I'm a bachelor but I got a family meal".

<div dir="rtl">
محشش راح على مطعم كي أف سي، طلع ميت من الضحك. ليش؟
رد: أنا ضحكت عليهم، أنا عزابي وأخذت وجبة عائلية.
</div>

52. At the hospital, a soft-spoken young man of the 'cute', 'mammy' and 'daddy' type was watching his wife giving birth to her first baby. She was screaming in pain and people gathered around. The husband stood aside and started slapping himself, saying, "It's my fault! It's all my fault!"

<div dir="rtl">
واحد في المستشفى من نوع كيوت ومامي ودادي كان يطلع على مرته وهي بتولد أول مولود. كانت تصرخ من الألم والناس اتجمعوا هناك. الزوج راح وقف لحاله وصار يلطم وجهه ويقول: أنا السبب! كله بسببي!
</div>

In (51), the jokester has employed the acronym KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), which is an internationalism from American popular food culture. Also, the expression 'family meal' vs. 'one person's meal' on which the joke is built is American culture-sensitive. Hence, this joke would be appreciated by Arab young adults and people of a reasonable general education who are familiar with American culture. There would however, be more general questions of comprehensibility within the Jordanian subculture and Arab culture at large. The English translation, however, is straightforward and the humor is captured effectively. Similarly, in (52), the jokester has borrowed three English words, viz. 'cute', mammy' and 'daddy', to describe the husband (i.e. butt of the joke) in preparation for the punch-line. Like the previous joke, this humor might involve issues of comprehensibility and appreciation within Arabic but not in the English translation, in which the humor is effectively rendered through conversational implicature.

6. Conclusion

The paper has examined a corpus of Jordanian jokes made on the humorous program 'A Joke Off-hand' and are collected from YouTube video clips. The findings show that the jokes are varied in theme, covering many aspects of life in Jordan, including drugs, marriage, body defects, education, food, money, etc. In terms of frequency, hash-addict and marriage jokes dominate thematically, accounting for almost 43 percent in the data. This may reflect a subconscious societal concern about these two subjects, i.e. the increasing level of drug consumption by young adults and the significant expenses required for marriage, respectively. Of particular interest in the thematic analysis are the total absence of political jokes and the very low frequency of sexual and religious jokes. This may be attributed to the sensitive nature of these topics in the relatively conservative society of Jordan, especially when it comes to telling jokes publically on a media program. It may also have to do with censorship exercised by the program, i.e. not broadcasting such jokes.

In terms of age, the corpus indicates that although the highest frequency of jokes were told by adults (66.33%), children and the elderly also tell a significant number of jokes (28% and 10.66%, respectively). While adult jokes tend to be elaborate, mature, and loaded with conversational implicatures, children's jokes tend to be one-liners, riddle-oriented, and less complex, such that the former usually require more effort in processing than the latter. As for thematic choice, the data shows that the three age groups (children, adults, and the elderly) can tell jokes about most subjects including drugs and marriage, which may seem age-restricted, i.e. for adults only. The fact that Jordanian children tell jokes relating to these two themes demonstrates how familiar these two subjects are in adult joking behavior to which children may be exposed, as well as their being acceptable as targets for humor, regardless of the jokester's age.

In terms of structure, the Jordanian joke consists of a set-up and a punch-line as recognized universally. The set-up varies in length – usually ranging between a routine opener and one detail in one-liner and riddle jokes and a routine opener and more than one detail (several in story-like jokes). In the former, the resolution of the incongruity is abrupt and the punch-line is quickly reached. By contrast, the latter involve heightening the degree of suspense by giving more details before the punch-line comes. In both cases, the punch-line must be shockingly unexpected in order for the intended humorous effect to be achieved.

Finally, Jordanian jokes that follow familiar human reasoning can readily travel into English (and supposedly into other languages) through good translation, supported sometimes by parenthetical material that explains culture-bound items. However, in many cases this is bound to reduce the funniness of the English translation. By contrast, Jordanian linguistic jokes stemming from word ambiguity, onomastics and idiomatic expressions challenge both comprehensibility and translatability, and any attempt to paraphrase such jokes is likely to result in a total loss of the humorous effect.

Mohammed Farghal (Professor)- Corresponding Author
Department of English Language and Literature
Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan
Middle East University, MEU Research Unit, Jordan
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-5012-8550
Email: m_farghal@asu.edu.jo

Jihad M Hamdan (Professor)
Department of English Language and Literature
The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-8952-6310
Email: j.hamdan@ju.edu.jo

Endnote

1. An anonymous reviewer suggests that parenthetical notes will make the jokes comprehensible. However - and this is quite important from the humour point of view - they are very unlikely to make the joke humorous. In fact, they are very likely to make the joke not humorous, i.e. not funny, because they eliminate the pithiness of the joke, which is an essential part of it.

2. The same anonymous reviewer posits that asking for a girl's hand in marriage is known in Britain (and the West more generally) because it was the norm at an earlier time in social history. It was, for example, typical in Victorian Britain - and is even found today, e.g:
   https://www.artofmanliness.com/people/relationships/asking-a-womans-father-for-her-hand-in-marriage/

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