

## Humour on Einstein as expressed in limericks

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*Albert Einstein (1879–1955) spent the final 35 years of his life as the most recognizable scientist of the 20th century. Though limericks were (are) conventionally associated with bawdy themes, limerick poets did prove that even Einstein’s physics can be tackled with such poems. In this study, I analyse 22 limericks which describe Einstein’s theories of relativity, quantum field theory, his personality, his brain and an unsuccessful attempt to disprove his theory. I conclude that the internet had liberated limericks to an extent that it may not be wrong to conclude that Einstein fans can anticipate numerous limericks in the future as well.*

Albert Einstein (1879–1955), due to his multi-faceted roles as a physicist, philosopher, peace activist and supporter of Zionist ideals, had served as a good foil for cartoonists, humorists and satirists<sup>1</sup>. This year marks the centenary year of his general theory of relativity<sup>2</sup>. Public adulation for Einstein<sup>3,4</sup>, which began in 1919 after the positive reports of British eclipse expeditions led by astrophysicist Arthur Eddington (1882–1944) to Sao Tome and Principe islands, continued until his death in 1955. As a consequence, Einstein’s brain came to be equated to something equivalent to that of a ‘genius’ and he was transformed into a commercial icon after his death<sup>1,5</sup>. Even though Bell<sup>6</sup> began her survey of the two novels on Einstein that appeared in 1990s with the sentence, ‘Perhaps one of the truest gauges of a person’s impact on culture is the limerick’, she had failed to elaborate on the relevance of its meaning in depth. She did cite only two limericks on Einstein.

A limerick is a form of five-line English verse in the category of a self-contained, humorous poem. The lines of a limerick follow the rhyme *aabba*; the third and fourth having two stresses and the others three<sup>7</sup>. Edward Lear (1812–1888) has been anointed as the limerick laureate for his role in popularizing this verse form<sup>8–10</sup>. In the Victorian era of the 19th century, due to the prevalence of sex-repressive mores, limericks were labelled as unprintable, nonsense verse with witty obscenities. As such, anonymity of limericks became another notable feature for this verse form, if they were not clean like that of Lear. In the earlier forms promoted by Lear, the first and the last line were the same. However, limerick evolved to an extent that the last line came to indicate a climactic or surprising twist<sup>11</sup>. Only during the past five decades, following the sexual liberation of

the 1960s, limericks did receive acceptance in conventional print media, due to the pioneering promotion made by Norman Douglas (1868–1952) and erotic folklorist Gershon Legman<sup>12,13</sup>. ‘An uninhibited history’ of limerick poems with over 500 examples from British and American sources was written by Baring-Gould<sup>14</sup>.

Previously, I had published a study on the sexual humour on Sigmund Freud as expressed in limericks<sup>15</sup>. As for Freud, one could note a congruency between his major research theme on eros and the principal focus on limericks relating to sex. Furthermore, for the past two decades, I also have studied Einstein’s life from a medical angle<sup>16–19</sup>. To the best of my knowledge, none had explored the theme why Einstein also had become a scientist model of limerick poets. Unlike Freud, Einstein’s major research themes (viz. relativity and quantum mechanics) do not share any congruency relating to sex. Nevertheless, it is appealing to note that few limerick poets have found Einstein’s research specialty an attractive theme for their creativity. As such, to felicitate the centenary year of Einstein’s formulation of the general theory of relativity<sup>20</sup>, I present an analysis on the accumulating limericks in which Einstein (or his theories) have been specifically tagged.

### Limericks on special and general theories of relativity

Though limericks were conventionally associated with bawdy themes, limerick poets of the 1920s and 1930s did prove that even Einstein’s physics can be tackled with neat limericks. The classic limerick which explained Einstein’s special theory of relativity first appeared anonymously in the *Punch* humour magazine

of 19 December 1923. Its author was Arthur Henry Reginald Buller (1874–1944), a British–Canadian mycologist<sup>21,22</sup>. Unfortunately, Einstein’s name did not appear in it. To quote:

There was a young lady named Bright  
Who traveled much faster than light  
She set out one day,  
In a relative way,  
And came back the previous night.

According to Goldsborough<sup>22</sup>, a sequel to this classic limerick was written by Buller in 1943, a year before his death. It read:

To her friends said the Bright one in  
chatter  
‘I have learned something new about  
matter:  
As my speed was so great,  
Much increased was my weight,  
Yet I failed to become any fatter.’

Not to be outperformed by limerick poets of his era, even Arthur Eddington contributed one in 1935 on the concept of uncertainty, the cornerstone of his attempt to unify relativity and quantum theory<sup>23</sup>. Eddington’s limerick was as follows:

There once was a brainy baboon,  
who always breathed down a bassoon,  
for he said, ‘It appears  
that in billions of years  
I shall certainly hit on a tune.’

Few limericks which I located on the internet (i.e. post-1995 period) offer varying turns on Einstein’s theories of relativity. To credit the authors of these limericks, I provide their tag names (if provided) within parenthesis, at the end of the last line.

Said the patent clerk, ‘Barman Al, *ein Großes Bier* in my favorite stein.’  
 ‘Right away, Bert’, spoke Al,  
 ‘Hear you’re moving on, pal.’  
 ‘Ja, physics will be my new line.’  
 [Skipjordan]

A photon’s a quantum of light  
 Which is countable: Count some! You  
 might  
 On a sun-dappled stroll  
 Count as a high as a mole:  
 That’s an Einstein (a grower’s delight)  
 [Mike Scholtes]

Coordinate-based calculation  
 Is eased by the Einstein notation:  
 It’s short and so sweet:  
 See an index repeat?  
 All its values are meant for summation!  
 [Mike Scholtes]

Albert Einstein developed this theory  
 That was weird to most laymen, and  
 eerie,  
 Where  $m$  times  $c$ -squared  
 On the right side compared  
 To the left side, which had but a mere  $E$ .  
 [Edmund Conti and Jesse Francovich]

Where  $E$  equals  $m$  (times)  $c$  square,  
 It describes relativity where  
 Time and space are involved –  
 And who got this resolved?  
 We know: Albert Einstein. So there.  
 [Kevin]

Einstein proposed that time  
 Was flexible and most sublime,  
 Go near fast as light,  
 And to you delight,  
 You’ll get home while still in your prime.  
 [Tom Dowling]

Albert Einstein had quite a proclivity  
 Towards pondering on relativity  
 His theorems they say  
 Still hold water today  
 Proving his was no quantum ability.  
 [Linda Magruder]

There once was a man called One Stone  
 Who had an informative moan  
 About worship of Reason:  
 ‘It doesn’t grow peas on  
 And dogs prefer rubber or bone’.  
 [Simon7banks]

Einstein, the frizzy-haired  
 Proved  $E$  equals  $Mc$  squared.  
 Thus, all mass decreases

As activity ceases.  
 Not my mass, my ass declared!  
 [Michael R. Burch]

**A limerick on the cosmological constant: Einstein’s ‘biggest blunder in my life’**

In 1917, Einstein introduced a cosmological constant (denoted by the Greek capital letter lambda), in one of his equations to explain general relativity, as applied to a static universe. In common parlance, it is also known as a ‘fudge factor’ – an anti-gravity force that may prevent the universe from collapsing. Subsequently, he withdrew it and lamented as a ‘biggest blunder in my life’<sup>24</sup>. Recent experimental investigations suggest that Einstein’s prediction of a cosmological constant may not be an error<sup>25</sup>. The following limerick depicts Einstein’s dilemma:

Though Einstein’s equations were firm  
 There was one thing that *did* make him  
 squirm  
 A cosmos expandable  
 Was not understandable,  
 So he tacked on that ill-fated term.  
 [David Morin]

**Limericks on quantum field theory**

On the interpretation of quantum mechanics, Einstein and his contemporary Niels Bohr (1885–1962) took opposing positions<sup>2,26,27</sup>. Einstein’s picturesque phrase ‘*Gott wurfelt nicht*’ was translated into English as ‘God does not play dice’. Graham Cotter presented a double limerick to interpret the Einstein–Bohr debate. The first one presents Einstein’s view, and the second one provides Bohr’s retort.

Said Albert, ‘I tell you now, twice  
 Good physics is balanced, and nice;  
 The uncertainty quantum  
 Is certainly phantom  
 I know now, God doesn’t play dice.’

Dear Bertie, you’re tied to the mast,  
 A Ulysses who’s bound to the past;  
 Our God does throw dice  
 And it’s scary, not nice  
 that Our God is the die that is cast.

In the first limerick, Einstein’s fancied quip in German appears in its English

translation. To rhyme with ‘dice’, the second line ends with ‘nice’. The following limerick introduced the rhyming word ‘mice’ in the last line. To quote:

Old Albert’s incredibly nice  
 And his gods never seem to play dice,  
 But with hickory dickory  
 Point-of-view trickery,  
 Clocks run down relative mice.  
 [Mephistopheles]

**Limericks on Einstein’s personality**

A limerick, combining sculptor Jakob Epstein (1880–1959), writer Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) and scientist Einstein based on the ‘Stein’ suffix of their family names was a popular one in the pre-internet era. True to form, the author’s identity remains unknown. The last line of this limerick promoted the then popular belief that Einstein’s theories were difficult to understand.

There is a strange family called Stein  
 There’s Ep and there’s Gert and there’s Ein  
 Ep’s statues are junk  
 Gert’s writing is punk  
 And no one can understand Ein!

As Hoffmann<sup>28</sup> had observed, ‘The myth arose that in the whole world only a half-dozen scientists were capable of understanding the general theory of relativity. When Einstein first propounded the theory this may well have been no great exaggeration. But even after dozens of authors had written articles and books explaining the theory, the myth did not die. It has had a long life and traces of it survive even now...’. Maybe, this particular limerick did play a minor role in perpetuating that myth among English speakers!

A sequel to this well-known limerick posted on the internet in 2010, under the tag name ‘Just Fran’ read as follows:

Now I never thought of Epstein as  
 naughty  
 And Einstein seemed ever so haughty  
 Now Gertrude Stein  
 Was a lady fine  
 She was undoubtedly, doughty

An anonymous limerick which I located on the internet told the price difference set by a brain salesman, between the

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brain of Einstein and that of a run-of-the-mill politician.

Were a brain salesman's prices confused?  
'Einstein's: 25 cents', he enthused  
'For this pol's: twenty grand'  
No, those prices were planned –  
The politico's hadn't been used!

### Naughty Limericks on Einstein

A popular double limerick with an erotic tinge, recorded by Gershon Legman<sup>12</sup> in his anthology, was dated to 1947. It is as follows:

Said Einstein, 'I have an equation  
Which science might call Rabelaisian  
Let P be virginity  
Approaching infinity,  
And U be a constant, persuasion

'Now if P over U be inverted  
And the square root of U be inserted  
X times over P,  
The result, Q.E.D.  
Is a relative,' Einstein asserted.

### A limerick on the 'neutrino travels faster than light experiment' fiasco

On 23 September 2011, scientists who conducted an experiment alluringly labelled with an acronym OPERA (Oscillation Project with Emulsion-tRacking Apparatus) at the Gran Sasso National Laboratory in Italy reported an astounding finding. They had observed neutrinos, a class of subatomic particles, sent from CERN laboratory in Geneva to their underground lab in Italy which exceeded the speed of light<sup>29</sup>. This announcement challenged Einstein's special theory of relativity. Subsequently, that result was disproved, due to errors in faulty wiring in the experimental set-up<sup>30,31</sup>. A limerick poet with the tag name 'Benjamin The Donkey' had tackled this theme humorously as follows:

Ever since time first began  
Light traveled as fast as it can  
Al's theories still thrive  
(Except for warp drive)  
'Cause he's f\*\*\*ing Einstein, man!

### Conclusion

Using the merits possessed by the internet, limerick poets have posted numerous new limericks in their websites and blogs for open viewing. However, rather than openly identifying themselves, many hide behind masks of nicknames/handle names. I make two conclusions. First, that Einstein himself was a humorist was proven by the fact that he enjoyed composing doggerels in German. A sample of these doggerels had appeared in the works of his biographers<sup>3,32,33</sup>. Thus, had he been living, Einstein would have enjoyed the limericks which had been accumulating at his expense. Secondly, internet had liberated limericks to an extent that limerick poets have embraced this medium to promote their humorous thoughts on Einstein's contributions to physics without restrictions that prevailed during the pre-internet era. If this trend prevails, it may not be wrong to conclude that Einstein fans can anticipate numerous limericks served to them aplenty.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. I am indebted to the anonymous limerick poets of print anthologies and the internet, who had contributed to humour studies by shedding some light to Einstein's lore.

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