

**„DUNĂREA DE JOS” UNIVERSITY OF GALAȚI
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DOCTORAL THESIS

**TRANSLATING STAND-UP COMEDY.
A CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC APPROACH**

Abstract

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Introduction

The doctoral thesis, “*Translating Stand-Up Comedy. A Cultural - Linguistic Approach*” is constructed as to present an analysis of humour, focusing on *stand-up comedy* as a subtype of humour. It is important to mention that stand-up comedy has become a topic of interest to people all over the world in the past years. The thesis offers examples to illustrate the way in which the performer makes use of different techniques in creating a successful performance on stage. The examples represent parts of stand-up comedy performances, and roast routines.

Humour is seen as a general characteristic of stand-up comedy, it represents the quality of being funny, or the faculty of perceiving and expressing or appreciating what is amusing or comical. As stated in the title, this doctoral thesis approaches the field of stand-up comedy, based on an analysis of the translation strategies used and the humour theories which can be identified within stand-up comedy acts. The overall analysis will be conducted based on a corpus built out of both English and Romanian sample texts of stand-up comedy shows. One of the most important elements characterizing humour is the quality of wordplay: if a text is funny or amusing, then it can be introduced in the vast field of humour. Humour seen in its multiple forms has an important feature *to be funny*, meaning to result in laughter and to make the listener react in a positive, lively way to the text uttered by the speaker. Humour can be found in several types of comedy, such as the anecdote and the blunder, a genre of humour involving a character or a comedian making foolish mistakes which seem humorous to the audience, Rowan Atkinson, known as Mr. Bean, being a representative performer of this type of humour.

The difficulty of this thesis lies in combining three major areas, *translation theories*, *humour theories* and the *cultural aspects* revealed in stand-up comedy with the understanding of linguistic units that characterize this specific type of humour. Because of the process of globalization, *Stand-up comedy* has become a popular form of entertainment all around the world during the last few decades. In the past years the influence of the West in the area of humour has registered an increase, United States of America has influenced the way in which stand-up comedy is spread around the world, and its influence is very noticeable in European humour. However, the research done in the field of comedy and humour has been widely explored as compared to the study of stand-up comedy. Thus, it has intrigued large masses of viewers, and has become the field of study for scholars in different disciplines as well. Built as a contrastive analysis of the comedy created by American and Romanian performers, this analysis is, first and foremost, an approach to analysing humour in such a way as it can turn

out as a contribution to the domain of critical discourse analysis by examining a corpus that consists of various transcripts from stand-up comedy performances, translating them and commenting on the gains, losses and compensations identified in the process of translation. As it is mentioned in the title, focus will be laid on the concept of *stand-up comedy*, the characteristics of the jokes occurring within the acts and on their translated version. A successful stand-up comedy act depends on the comedian's ability to use various linguistic aspects of joke telling. Stand-up comedy can be described as a teamwork, it is a collaboration between performers and their audience, those two being dependent on each other with the latter being responsible for the performer's timing. Their reaction (manifested either as laughter or silence) shows the joke teller whether they have understood the joke or not, and further, if they appreciate it or not. Stand-up comedy is first and foremost a monologue presented by a comedian on stage in front of an audience, the diversity of performers as well as the multiple types of topics used to create a discourse is what attracts the audience. The performances are characterised by freedom of speech, there are no forbidden topics and the comedians make use of this freedom to speak their mind. This thesis will focus on bringing a contribution to the humour and translation research domain.

Starting from the premise that stand-up comedy is an important category of humour and that its translation can bring forward new challenges, the thesis is constructed to illustrate a theoretical and practical support for both humour and translation studies as well as linguistic and cultural notions, and a corpus based analysis for the theory presented.

The personal contribution can be noticed in the approach made from multiple points of view of the topic 'stand-up comedy', in the selection, transcription and translation of the sample texts, pointing out the difficulties which were encountered and presenting the solutions found justifying the translation strategy used, and in creating diagrams and analysis which can be used to facilitate the analysis of a text belonging to stand-up comedy.

The scientific novelty is represented by the selection of a topic which was never approached in this manner before, the use of a complex method of analysis which brings together humour theories, translation strategies, linguistic concepts and cultural elements. Furthermore, text samples are provided which present a higher degree of difficulty in translation, the solutions offered being relevant for this research domain. An innovation is also represented by the cultural-linguistic approach to humour. Of course, this direction is implied by the specificity of American stand-up comedy shows, which are characterised by

the excessive use of cultural elements; but we can not ignore the attempt to promote the minor culture (the Romanian culture) towards the major language and culture (the English culture). In this case, maybe more than in translating American performances, the translator uses his ability as intercultural mediator, if we start from the premise that the receiver of the translation is less accustomed with Romanian culture. Another element of novelty is represented by the use of topics related to political discourse in a humourous manner in the form of a roast.

Motivation:

There are two reasons for choosing this particular topic for my thesis, the first reason is subjective and is based on my personal affinity for this type of humour, because for more than 10 years I have had an interest in stand-up comedy humour and through this dissertation I will continue the research started during the MA studies on stand-up comedy. The second reason for selecting this topic is that I think that based on the theories that I have studied over the years and with the guidance of my academic supervisor I have become able to analyse stand-up comedy from different perspectives which I consider to be relevant in bringing a small contribution to the field of humour and translation.

The purpose of this thesis is to approach stand-up comedy from a new and more complex perspective; bringing together humour theories, translation studies, linguistic studies and cultural studies to create a more elaborate analysis of this concept.

The aims of this doctoral thesis are:

- to identify the translating procedures that prove to be more effective in translating stand-up comedy;
- to show the importance of linguistic aspects in the process of translating and analysing a stand-up comedy show considering the audio-visual, textual, physical aspects and keeping in mind the importance of the interaction between the performer and the audience;
- to illustrate to what degree can a performance be influenced by the audience present at the stand-up comedy show;
- to present cultural specificities of one's race and to point out the losses that may occur when trying to translate the written text of a show;

- to illustrate how the cultural background and context influence the way in which a performance of stand-up comedy is perceived by the audience and by the translator;

Research Methodology:

The research methods that I used can be categorised on different levels, a *general research method*, *linguistic method*, *cultural approach* and a *contrastive method* based on the analysis of the source texts used and the translation provided for them; in addition to that, the contrastive approach was used to compare a pre-existing translation for some corpus texts with the translation that I have offered. Furthermore, I used the contrastive and comparative method to create a diagraph which measures the frequency of discourse markers used in stand-up comedy performances belonging to 5 different comedians and a diagram which compares the frequency with which translation strategies are used in a stand-up comedy routine based on the examples provided. In identifying linguistic strategies in stand-up comedy performances, I used the inductive method which proved to be useful. The general research method can be divided into documentary methods, data collection, processing the information acquired and analysing the data according to the theories and strategies to which I make references throughout the thesis.

Furthermore, the *analytical procedures* that I used throughout my research consists of a selection of transcripts from stand-up comedy shows and roast comedy performances, downloading subtitles, applying a cultural analysis and at the same time identifying the translation techniques that best apply for this type of humour.

Corpus selection:

The corpus for analysis brings together texts characterised by cultural references, taboo language as well as slang, accent or dialect, the use of props and the artistic performance on stage. It is clear that while analysing a stand-up comedy show one can't ignore the important contribution of the receiver of the message, because the reaction of the audience in form of laughter or silence shows the performer if they have understood the joke or not, and further, if they appreciate it or not.

The overall corpus used for this dissertation consists of a total of 17 stand-up comedy performers with a total of 22 stand-up comedy routines, 8 editions of the White House Correspondents Association Dinner, from 2010 up until 2017, with a total of 10 performances and one Stand-up Comedy Roast which comprises the work of 8 performers. It is worth

mentioning that the performers are of different gender, race and religion because it is important to see the cultural differences which may influence a stand-up comedy performance. In order to illustrate, present, translate and analyse them, I had to listen to the shows and write down the transcripts myself, offering my own translation to the texts to illustrate the Romanian or English version of a comedy routine.

Structure:

This thesis consists of four chapters, each chapter presenting a new direction for the analysis of stand-up comedy. The first chapter, *The Interdisciplinary Nature of Joke Telling in Stand-Up Comedy*, focuses on American and Romanian stand-up comedy performers, representing a starting point in the contrastive approach that follows in the next chapters. In addition, focus is laid on analysing stand-up comedy by means of the humour theories formulated by Raskin and Attardo. Incongruity, superiority and release are the three theories on which the research is based in the first chapter. As mentioned by Veale (2004:424) “*a humour theory must not look for incongruities, but provide a social explanation for why we enjoy insulting others and why a feeling of social intimacy can arise when this insult is licensed by the cooperative principle of joke-telling.*” The superiority theory focuses on “*the importance of aggression in humour*”(Bogdan 2015:10), the feeling of superiority towards others can be a way to trigger laughter. The release theory mainly consists of punch lines or jokes that are used to release emotional tension gathered within the show. These are designed to characterize the stand-up comedy act, increasing efficiency when analysing a form of verbal humour.

The second subchapter is destined to present some of the researchers from the field of translation studies. The work of researchers such as M. Baker (1992), P. Newmark (1988), or B. Hatim (1990, 2009, 2013), Duff (1989)etc. was presented and based on those theories text examples were selected to translated and analysed in order to prove which of these theories are most often used while translating stand-up comedy humour. Although the text examples may seem very long, it is important to present the whole context of a joke because in this humour category the written text constitutes only 40% of the joke; the other 60% is made up of the verbal and body language used by the performer along with the reaction of the audience and the way it interacts with the performer during a show.

Further on, researching the ways in which humour can be expressed in stand-up comedy, I have listed seven types of comedy act characteristics, these were selected based on

their usefulness towards decoding stand-up comedy, understanding and listing all the elements that compose a stand-up comedy show. The first chapter will present the characteristics of the monologue, which Castellón (2008) mentioned it as having its origins in the stand-up comedy which was performed in the United States of America. It is known that there are multiple ways of expressing humour, stand-up comedy is usually presented as a monologue consisting on a succession of jokes or short stories.

Paralanguage, plays a central role in humour in general and it is listed as one of the most representative characteristics of stand-up comedy, it is described as a multitude of gestures which are “*important in humour that depends heavily on performance and acting.*” (Apte 1985:205) With the help of paralanguage the performer uses his voice as a prop, to imitate someone during a joke or to create an identity and to use a different voice throughout the show. As far as ridicule is concerned, there are three types of ridicule which can be found during a presentation of stand-up comedy, *private-ridicule*, *shared-ridicule* and *self-ridicule* (Wilson 1979:189). More important is to see how the performer uses ridicule while constructing a text. Satire it is usually used to laugh about people seen as superior to oneself and it represents a way to “attack” an individual, institution or an event. Furthermore, politeness, power and solidarity represent a way to approach both topic and audience at the same time. The examples provided were selected as to illustrate the way in which the performer makes use of these characteristics, how they influenced the fluidity of a live performance and based on them which were the reactions that the performer received from the audience. By creating a stage persona, performers manage to give birth to a unique style of performing on stage.

The following subchapter presents African-American stand-up comedian Eddie Griffin; based on a sample text belonging to one of his performances the concept of multimodality in live performances will be presented. The last subchapter will focus on Romanian stand-up comedy performances, providing a translation for the text and presenting the translation difficulties which can occur. Because of the dialect used and because of the specific register several words or phrases were very difficult to translate but nonetheless, a translation was provided for them. An analysis was provided for them, explaining the choice for the translation. The texts are indeed long in length but are very useful because in stand-up comedy it is important to understand the full context of a joke.

The second chapter, *Linguistic Aspects in Translating Stand-Up Comedy*, starts with defining and presenting linguistic aspects in the manner in which they can be applied to an analysis based on a corpus of stand-up comedy shows.

The theoretical concepts for this chapter were presented here and not in the beginning of the dissertation because it is very important to present and analyse them separate and in detail; offering multiple examples to understand and see how these linguistic aspects actually function in stand-up comedy performances.

The subchapters are represented by the levels of linguistics, especially by their object of study, which can be used in different manners to systematically analyse a stand-up comedy performance, not only the text itself but also the performance and the performer, analysing the text based on the type of sentences used. This chapter aims at presenting the linguistic features of jokes used in stand-up comedy shows, starting with repetition to see which are its characteristics in a stand-up comedy show and how and when the performer uses it. Formulaicity is represented by phrase structures usually used by the performer to start a new topic, they can be categorised based on the performer. Disfluencies represent a short break in the performance due to the intervention from someone in the audience. The interaction, during a show, between performer and audience can produce disfluencies. To analyse the linguistic feature of discourse markers a diagram was established to represent their frequency based on the work of five different comedians. Furthermore, intonation is used by the performer as a prop for a joke or for the entire show. All these elements brought together can represent a starting point in proving the importance of linguistics when it comes to analysing and translating stand-up comedy shows. It is interesting to see how a show can be analysed based on the use of several linguistic features, things that make each performance unique. Furthermore, based on the linguistic features identified, we can create certain patterns which can be applied to a comedian based on specific characteristics of their performance on stage.

Considering that this type of humour brings together the three major elements Sender - Message – Receiver, it is important to pay the necessary attention to language as a way of revealing the real identity of the performer. In this respect, sociolinguistics and the way language and culture fuse together in providing meaning to a humorous text will be analysed in detail.

The last subchapter will present sociolinguistics, concept which deals with social patterns, dialects, things that give a new meaning to the use of language. Sociolinguists think

that the way in which speakers present themselves to others or how they interact with others strongly depends on how language is used. Furthermore, focus will be laid on intercultural communication, characterised by concepts such as identity, or how people manage to create and construct their own identity, otherization, which constructs and reduces people to be less than what they are, easily misunderstanding things and creating wrong stereotypes.

Intercultural sensitivity characterised by self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness and empathy, analysing how a person openly states an opinion and accepts the opinion of others, how the comedian identifies himself with the other, momentarily sharing the same opinion and emotions. Cultural knowledge is important for both audience and translator. To understand a joke one has to have knowledge of the culture and language used by a comedian to fully understand the context of the joke. In illustrating the importance of cultural knowledge examples which are relevant for the analysis were provided. It is important to see how these concepts manage to influence the way in which people interact with each other. Examples of stand-up comedy texts have been provided specific to performers belonging to different countries, races, faiths, cultures, etc., who approach different topics which are relevant to the analysis of this thesis.

The third chapter, *Cultural Space and Race in Stand-Up Comedy*, starts from the premise that space and race constitute important factors which have influenced the history and development of humour, especially in the case of stand-up comedy.

Throughout this chapter four different types of stand-up comedy performances will be presented, they have in common the topic of race; how it is perceived by the comedian, how he presents it as a joke and the way in which the audience reacts to race related topics are some issues which will be dealt with. As the title clearly states, cultural space and race will be presented by comedians belonging to different races, because nowadays, more and more comedians leave their countries and choose to stay in a place where they are permitted to speak their mind, even if that means breaking the rules of their country. It is obvious from their routines that many performers choose either Europe or the United States for promoting their humorous speech in a place where speaking your mind is not a crime. Some factors can change the direction of stand-up comedy according to space and race and to the nationality and history of the comedians who go on stage and perform an act of stand-up. This thesis provides examples of different performers who reached the conclusion that they are better off in a different country or even on another continent, a new place where there are no limits.

Being a Jewish or a Muslim does not offer many possibilities in their home country, but some comedians took a risk and followed their dreams.

Stand-up comedians have a tendency to make their comedy shows personal; by making it about their personal life they manage to create a stronger connection with the audience.

Another important element that will be taken into consideration throughout this thesis is tracing the boundary between free speech and hate speech. We ought to acknowledge the fact that a stand-up comedy show is often highly influenced by the origins of the performer, and that jokes have to be carefully thought through before presenting them on stage in front of an audience. Performers have to be very careful in not crossing that line; one has to know what topics they are allowed to approach and what topics they should avoid if a successful career in stand-up comedy is desired.

Furthermore, this chapter aims at showing how important things such as the Holocaust or the Muslim faith can influence performances on stage, and to see whether these performances can lead to hate speech and whether the reaction of the audience is the desired one or if it is a negative one. It features a short review of what means to be a Muslim, a Jew, a Negro or a typical American and what common sense boundaries should not be crossed. Thus, one should know that not all jokes are funny and not all of them are accepted by the audience. A performer can make jokes about their own race and religion, while if others do so; they cross the line towards hate speech and that between what is considered to be humorous and what is offensive. The Muslim performers present stand-up comedy shows using topics related to the 9/11 tragedy, they approach the Arab stereotype in a humorous manner, starting from the premise that if you are Muslim you must be a terrorist. Furthermore, Shazia Mirza will present a show based on Muslim women rights and the freedom a woman should possess. The Jewish performers approach two distinctive types of topics, Jerry Seinfeld never talks about his faith, his performances being based on everyday life topics, opposed to Jerry Seinfeld's style, Lewis Black approaches the topic of race and beliefs throughout his performances. The third type of stand-up comedy is represented by African-American Dave Chappelle, he presents the topic of racism from a black and white perspective. The fourth type of stand-up comedy illustrated belongs to American performer George Carlin. The topics used cover faith, religion and death. The sample texts used for this category is rather long because it is important to illustrate the whole context of a joke. After translating and analysing the sample texts a diagram was constructed to illustrate the

frequency of the translation strategies used in this particular context, and to see which strategy is most often used.

The last chapter, *A Politically Correct Stand-Up Comedy Roast*, focuses on humour discourse analysis and presents the concept of a politically correct comedy, and if indeed stand-up comedy can observe rules of correctness while approaching different topics. The importance of this chapter lies in the frequent use of political humour and political correctness.

The corpus for the politically correct stand-up comedy will be provided by performances presented during the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. Important political figures, such as President Barack Obama, who act as comedy performers and approach topics that are usually avoided because of their offensive nature. Topics regarding the press, the Republican Party and the elections are just a part of the topics used during the comedy performances. One of the most important characteristics is the inventive manner in which serious and official problems are brought forward to the audience and are presented as jokes even if some of them represent national issues.

Furthermore, a subtype of stand-up comedy will be presented, given that it is important to see how humour interacts with the social and political life and to what extent a performance can be taken without being considered rude and offensive. This subtype is represented by the roast and as text example fragments from the Comedy Central roast of Donald Trump will be presented. In analysing this subtype of stand-up comedy, certain traits of on stage performances were identified and analysed. How the performers are selected and how they roast the main guest are elements which help characterise stand-up comedy.

Based on the analysis made throughout the dissertation there can be created specific patterns for each performer including humour and translation strategies, linguistic aspects and cultural specificities. This thesis brings together several theories concerning translation, humour and cultural aspects. It is very important to mention that the theoretical background for the stand-up comedy concept is not very vast, the books written so far on stand-up comedy represent only a general presentation and focus mainly on how to create a stand-up comedy performance rather than an analysis of the topic or context in which it is used, or an analysis related to translation studies. Therefore, this thesis illustrates a more detailed analysis that can be considered a step forward into this particular branch of humour analysis. The

conclusions for this doctoral thesis bring together the results from the text and context analysis and the findings that are valuable in the analysis of the stand-up comedy field.

Conclusions

In answering the question *Why is it important to translate stand-up comedy?* two reasons have been found, first of all because of the globalization process the interest in stand-up comedy presented a significant growth as well as the requests for their subtitles, and the second reason is that because of the intelligent manner in which the texts are constructed, they bring forward a fresh corpus full of challenges for humour and translation studies.

Stand-up comedy is a type of humour which lately has started to attract the attention of researchers and the approach presented throughout this thesis is the first one of this type. As shown, an analysis of stand-up comedy is primarily based on the performer, the visual performance, the artistic act, the text and the audience. The approaches presented in the thesis can be used to create several patterns to make the analysis of stand-up comedy more accessible. To analyze stand-up comedy one has to look at performer-act-audience as a sole identity. Stand-up comedy is the first type of humour which deals with race, beliefs and taboo topics in a different manner, brought forward by different types of comedians who make use of these topics to create laughter in a unique manner. Moreover, the thesis presents the manner in which stand-up comedy uses politics to create laughter and the manner in which politics uses stand-up comedy for political reasons. This statement being clearly illustrated in the examples provided and analysed as to present the importance of this relation.

It is important to mention that *stand-up comedy* is still in the process of research, the theoretical background regarding this type of humour is mostly based on general analysis of how a stand-up comedy show is constructed, the type of research presented in this thesis represents a new and challenging approach to stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy is the result of various written, audio-visual, physical and prop elements as well as the sender-receiver interaction. In this respect the task of the translator implies multiple stages of difficulty.

Translating this type of humour proves to be more challenging than expected, the translator will have to analyse the artist, the stage performance, the interaction with the audience and the text. As illustrated in the translations offered for the sample texts, the translation of the Romanian stand-up comedy text into English was the one with the highest

degree of difficulty, because of the special language characteristics, including dialect and paralinguistic, a challenge was also represented by text samples belonging to African-American performers because of the high use of slang words and a cultural specific background. The performances belonging to Muslim comedians showed a high degree of difficulty because of the cultural specific terminology used to describe objects and traditions specific to their culture. Based on the examples provided, this thesis offers possible translations for stand-up comedy texts, at the same time they are used to prove the importance of the linguistic features in an analysis conducted in this field and to illustrate which are the most frequent translation strategies used for such a text. Furthermore, because of the complex structure and based on the multiple points of view presented, this doctoral thesis offers a new approach to the study of stand-up comedy and can be seen as a starting point in this research domain.

Key words: humour theories, translation strategies, linguistic strategies, stand-up comedy, roast, political discourse

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