

*Giovanni Raffa*  
Sapienza University  
[giovanni.raffa@uniroma1.it](mailto:giovanni.raffa@uniroma1.it)

## **Broadcast Stand-up Comedy and Its Translation**

### **1. Introduction**

With the rise of new platforms for media consumption, aided by new digital technologies, wider audiences and a growing demand for translated materials, new audiovisual transfer modes have surfaced and with them the field of AVT “has grown exponentially, parallel to the production, consumption, interaction with and general interest in audiovisual products” [Chaume 2018: 41]. Following the mass-production and mass-translation of audiovisuals on streaming services (OTT) such as Netflix, Prime Video and Hulu, the field of translation studies started addressing changes both in the professional and amateur ecosystem [Massidda 2020], the translation strategies employed [Pedersen 2018], and the translation of texts evolving with the mediascape, which is addressed in this study.

Stand-up comedy is usually considered a live form of art, a performing art. However, digital consumption now allows comedians to reach a global audience thanks to the recording and broadcasting of their performances, and in turn this warrants the translation of the genre (and academic research into it). In this study, and its insights, having observed how the audiovisual format affects the performances on stage and on

screen, and their AVT subtitled versions in Italian, I propose three new concepts (transitioning, chaining, and hooking) in broadcast stand-up discourse analysis for (audiovisual) translation studies. This includes a discussion of the presence of audiovisual (semiotic) elements in the performances and inquiring on the fictionality of the dialogue.

The relevant data are drawn from three hour-long performances, or **specials** (two of which are streamed on Amazon Prime Video and one on Netflix): *Blood Sugar* (Ed Gamble), *Serious Black Jumper* (Jayde Adams), and *I'm Only Joking* (Jack Whitehall), all of which have been subtitled into Italian. By considering length, complexity of the monologue and dimension of the audience, specials can be easily defined as high-level, fully professionalized broadcast stand-up performances and, consequently, ideal candidates for the study purposes, hence justifying their choice as case studies here.

## 2. Subtitling Cultural References

Audiovisual translation of humor (AVTH) has been addressed by several scholars, both in dubbing and subtitling of the texts [Bucaria 2007; Jankowska 2009; Iaia 2015; Vandaele 2002]. Sitcoms and feature films have been the center of academic attention, yet stand-up comedy has been left out from inquiries so far, despite its ties to more traditional audiovisual texts. Bucaria [2017: 438] implies some of these connections as she notes how “the typical controversial humor of stand-up specials has proliferated in more mainstream products in recent years”. Subtitling practice is expected to comply with the spatial, temporal, and linguistic specifications of the audiovisual texts [Díaz-Cintas 2020: 183], and the added constraint of translating jokes into another language (and culture) led to discussion regarding the translation strategies employed [Chiaro 2005; Dore 2019]. Regarding the translation practices involved in AVTH, Dore [2019] discusses at length the humor mechanisms employed in comedies and their translation, mentioning how cultural references, among other elements, “need special handling in comedy since they may also serve many purposes” [*ibid.*: 281]. While some of these are explicitly connected to themes and characters, and consequently less fitting in stand-up, cultural references play a central role in the performers’ monologues and will be prioritized in the discussion of their translation here.

Pedersen [2011] separates extralinguistic from intralinguistic culture-bound references and discusses them from the perspective of the source

culture. Ranzato [2016] classifies culture specific references by employing a degree of exoticism and by “taking into account the nature of CSRs within the relationship between TT and ST and from the exclusive point of view of the TC” [*ibid.*: 63]. Analyses in this article are carried out based on Ranzato’s classification, as the author includes intertextual references, that is, “explicit or direct allusions to other texts” [*ibid.*: 64], which I believe contemporary stand-up comedy makes copious use of (from pop culture to cult movie and TV series to viral internet memes), especially considering the genre’s activist attitude and contemporary themes.

TABLE 1. CSR Translation

SHOW	ENGLISH AUDIO	ITALIAN SUBTITLES
Adams, <i>Serious Black Jumper</i>	You know the sentence she says? Audience: Who runs the world? Yeah! Who does? Audience: Girls! “China” is actually the answer.	Ricordate la frase che dice? Audience: “Chi comanda il mondo”? Esatto. Chi? Audience: Le donne! “La Cina” è la risposta giusta.
Gamble, <i>Blood Sugar</i>	What breed is yours? Ooh, Roman Catholic? Very nice, yeah. We had one of those but we had to get rid of it when we had kids.	Il suo di che razza è? Un Cattolico Romano! Bellissimo. Ne avevo uno anch’io ma ho dovuto darlo via quando è nato mio figlio.
Whitehall, <i>I’m only joking</i>	So, the other day, I was in the supermarket, my favorite, the „Lie-dl.” Or when I’m in the States, „Walmar.”	L’altro giorno ero al supermercato, il mio preferito, il “Lie-dl”. O quando sono negli Stati Uniti, “Walmar”.
	Sat on the sofa in a Slanket, crunching through an <i>al dente</i> Bombay Bad Boy,	Seduto sul divano con una coperta con le maniche, a sgranocchiare i noodle „Bombay Bad Boy” al dente,

The first joke from Table 1 features an intertextual reference: a direct quote of a musical hit by Beyoncé whose lyrics became popular as

a feminist anthem. Full Italianization of the lyrics in the subtitles, while still being humorous to an extent, hints at a professional preference for literal translation of CSRs, even when unnecessary. In the second excerpt, from *Blood Sugar*, Gamble works with punchlines whose humor relies on religious terms and dog-sitting situations, which has been translated literally in the Italian subtitle. The English term implies a distinction between religious beliefs, which is not present in the target culture, and the adaptation consequently results in an unfamiliar utterance. While literal translation of CSRs seems the preferred option, the corpus presents numerous inconsistencies. In the third joke from Table 1, supermarket names are kept in the SL in the Italian subtitles, despite the previous instances of literal translation and the said elements (such as Walmart) being somewhat exotic to the Italian audience. Furthermore, in the last joke, the brand is not translated at all, yet “slanket” is, probably in the hope that the audience would grasp the humor in the collocation “bad boy.”

These strategies and the apparent arbitrariness of their use result in Italian scripts with mostly effective translation that keep the narrative flow of the monologues, were it not for the constant spikes in apparently inadequate adaptations, resulting in either the humor most likely to fail to come across or to elicit puzzlement from the audience given the translator’s choices.

### 3. Audiovisual Elements in the Performances

On a purely technical level, some changes in the broadcasting of stand-up comedy are the immediate consequence of turning a live performance (traditionally recorded “audio only” for the radio or audio technology, such as record albums) into an audiovisual re-watchable, streamable product that inevitably incorporates some fundamental elements of audiovisuals, most noticeably camera framing, audio sampling, editing, etc. Despite focusing intensely on verbally-expressed humor, it has been observed in the corpus that there is a general reliance of the performers on being watched, expressed by exploiting their image, facial expression or mouthed words, showing props to the audience or non-verbally re-enacting the scenarios they describe. This impedes defining the genre as exclusively audio-based.

Audiovisual texts deliver their message via an audio channel and a visual channel [Delabastita 1989] and they do so by means of a plethora of different codes, the nature of which has been analyzed by different

authors [*ibid.*; Chaume 2004]. Díaz-Cintas and Remael [2020: 65] further summarize the modes which constitute the audiovisual text as: a) aural-verbal, b) aural-nonverbal, c) visual-verbal, and d) visual-nonverbal. Apart from the aural-verbal mode, which happens to be the most prevalent one in broadcast stand-up, the corpus accounts for a marginal, not consistent but growing, presence of aural-nonverbal (music, soundtrack) and visual messages (presentations).

More complex items are present in the corpus: the introduction of short, filmed sections (i.e.: Gamble's re-enactment of his masseuse anecdote; Whitehall's intro and outro) and the use of additional material within the broadcast performance. This ranges from pictures and readings from email excerpts, up to full-fledged slide presentations. Jayde Adams makes copious use of the latter, mocking documentary talk while informing the audience with a PowerPoint presentation. Furthermore, Adams uses a waiting room-styled tune to set the mood for her sarcastic commentary on celebrity culture, consequently turning part of her performance into a full-on TED Talk parody by taking advantage of aural-nonverbal modes.

Since the performers under study consistently rely on linguistic, visual, paralinguistic, and extralinguistic cues, it becomes clear that broadcast stand-up presents itself as a hybrid text, featuring multimodal audiovisual elements, and therefore should be analyzed as such. However, while research into stand-up yields mixed results rather than a clear identification, it highlights how composite the performances can be on screen and the elements to account for in discussing the relevance of its audiovisual features and translation.

On the visual modes, two main items are to be considered: material aids (objects, email screenshots, pictures, videos, etc.) and the performers themselves. Stand-up comedians convey the vast majority of their messages by talking, and as previously mentioned they employ additional tools in order to make their jokes come across. A provisional list of the most prominently audiovisual elements or items in broadcast stand-up comedy, therefore, includes **props**, **body language**, and **multimodality**. Table 2 shows examples of the performers relying on multimodal aids and props, respectively, along with the translated excerpts.

TABLE 2. Visual aids in the performances

SHOW	IMAGES	ENGLISH AUDIO	ITALIAN SUBTITLES
Adams, <i>Serious Black Jumper</i>	(digital) Picture of Kylie Jenner > picture of Muppets	Now, this is what the girls want their eyebrows to look like. But unfortunately, this is what they actually look like.	Quelle sono le sopracciglia che tutte le ragazze vogliono. Ma sfortunatamente, il loro aspetto in realtà è questo.
	(digital) Picture of Kim Kardashian > stock picture of a cupboard	Kourtney, Khloé, the most famous one, Kim, and a son called Rob, who is so fat they keep him in a cupboard.	Kourtney, Khloe, la più famosa Kim, e un figlio di nome Rob, che è così grasso che lo tengono in una credenza.
	(digital) Picture of Caitlyn Jenner > picture of a tin can filled with worms	Here is Caitlyn Jenner winning woman of the year award, which, I'll be honest, is a can of worms.	Ecco Caitlyn Jenner mentre vince il premio „Donna dell'anno”, che, sinceramente, è un verminaio.
Gamble, <i>Blood Sugar</i>	Picture of a puppy > picture of an old dog	Ladies and gentlemen, one week later, according to the charity, this is what Berry looks like now. Some of the more observant amongst you may have noticed a few key differences.	Signore e signori, una settimana dopo, secondo l'associazione, Berry è così. I più perspicaci di voi avranno notato qualche differenza sostanziale.

As can be observed in the examples, multimodal items are generally simple, straightforward pictures, and therefore the humor lies in how the performer discusses them linguistically. In the third example, the picture is physical, and presents some writing (with puns), which is later discussed by the comedian. The translation remains unaffected, as the humor

is successfully transferred in the speech regardless of the pun, due to the funny element being rooted in the monologue rather than in a single joke or picture. Nevertheless, Table 2 demonstrates how stand-up comedy keeps striving to go beyond words, thus requiring study as an audiovisual text.

To clarify the genre's standpoint as an audiovisual text, I will represent appropriate collocations of broadcast stand-up comedy on the audiovisual mapping plane proposed by Zabalbeascoa [2008] in fig. 1. The position and dimension of the area is intentionally large and vague to accommodate for performances that stray from the prototypical stand-up paradigm.

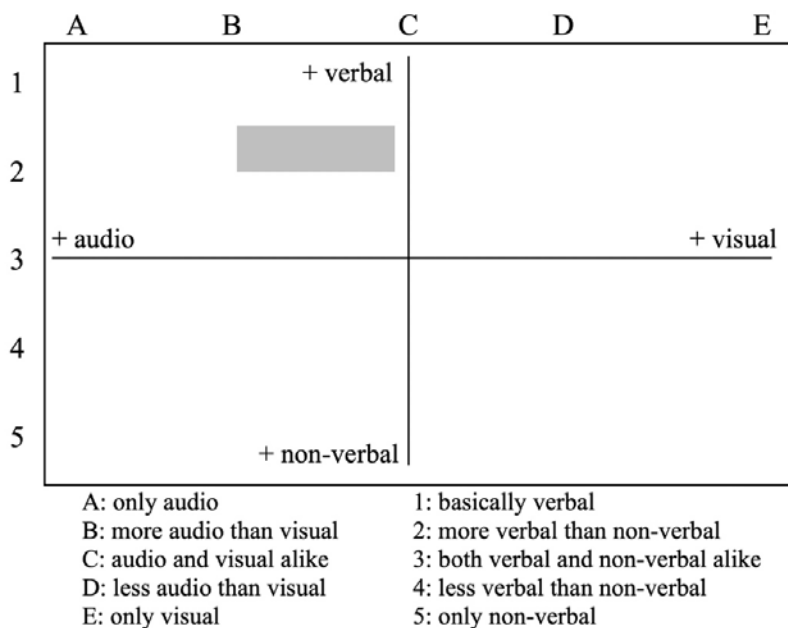


Figure 1. Mapping Plane of Audiovisual Texts

While in the original study prototypical stand-up comedy is located at 2B, I argue that broadcast stand-up should be located on a strip going from 2B to 2C (fig. 1), in accordance with the following arguments:

- 1) Broadcast stand-up comedians' reliance on being watched impedes any horizontal collocation on 1.

- 2) For the same reason, vertical areas on A have been excluded, as only the less contemporary and more traditional performances could sustain a conversion to an audio-only media.
- 3) No matter how pervasive the role of the visual channel, stand-up comedy prioritizes oral communication by definition, and therefore cannot be placed in areas covering D or E, as it is never “less audio than visual,” below 3.

With this in mind, along with the data in Table 2, it follows that translation in the corpus remains unaffected by the use of visually-delivered messages, as the jokes transcend cultural identity and aim at ridiculing facts and evidence. In this sense, the visual channel, albeit consistently employed, tends to act as an economic knowledge vector. Consequently, the translation of broadcast stand-up still prioritizes discourse structure and speech registers over delivery of visual information.

#### 4. Discourse Style

Being scripted, stand-up routines have an underlying performing quality aimed at covering up the planned nature of the script, giving it a more improvisational quality. Exploiting a façade of anecdotal comedy and unfiltered, spontaneous colloquialism is a defining feature of the genre: while the humorous content is delivered and managed on a structural level, the staged spontaneity is manifested through the discourse style, similarly to how classic audiovisual texts employ fictional dialogue. It naturally follows that strategic translation of the register is fundamental to produce a TT that sounds spontaneous to the audience and conveys the amicable and colloquial atmosphere of stand-up monologues.

Fictional, natural-sounding dialogue can be defined as “planned to be written and to eventually be acted as if not written” [Gregory and Carroll 1978: 55]. There are however differences between broadcast stand-up comedy and filmic medias, the main one being on the interactional level: while in traditional audiovisuals the characters communicate with each other and the audience simply witnesses the events,<sup>1</sup> in stand-up comedy the mimicked conversation unfolds by addressing the audience directly.

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<sup>1</sup> While it is true that, often with humorous intentions, there are occurrences of characters that break the fourth wall to speak their mind freely, I would argue that said techniques have different purposes and are therefore of negligible importance to this discussion.



This is ascribable to stand-up comedy's divergence from more prototypical audiovisual texts, in which parallel worlds and universes are often involved in the narrative. According to Brock [2011: 275], communication among characters in audiovisuals employs different language systems, while communication between comedians and audiences happens within the same system (Everyday English Language). This multiplicity stems from the fact that in fictional audiovisual texts, "each character would have their own language system" [*ibid.*] in order to participate in the creation of new worlds. Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, completely lacks in characters and does not aim at world creation in the filmic sense. Of course, self-caricature and impersonations are quasi-ubiquitous in stand-up, yet they do not impact the performance comparably to characters and their dialogues in TV series et alia, in which they are participants in both building the foundation of the plot and in its progression [Bednarek 2011: 196]. Despite stand-up comedy employing a "soft character" in its own way there is no articulate storyline or plot to follow and adhere to, no inter-character relationship to define.

Baños-Piñero and Chaume [2009] described audiovisual dialogue in dubbing as prefabricated orality: a discourse style aimed at mimicking everyday conversation and "based on a script to be interpreted as if it had not been written" [*ibid.*: 2]. The main advantage of this type of dialogue is undoubtedly its ability to convey additional, contextual information about characters, settings and past events without having to rely on an external narrator, as well as "depicting realism through language" [*ibid.*]. Prefabricated orality was proposed by drawing from features of both orality and dubbese, and its analytical framework was derived from their combined features. Since in this study, prefabricated orality is addressed in the ST and in subtitling, observations will exclude the phonetic and prosodic level.

The corpus presented a simple vocabulary, high density of exophoric references, lexical creativity, and simple syntactic structure in the Italian subtitles, which can be observed in Table 1 and 2. Likewise, the English audio presented the same features consistently with its translation, with the exception of repetitions and syntactic dysfluencies, which have not been rendered in Italian due to the reductive nature of subtitling [Díaz-Cintas 2020: 183]. Despite these strong affinities and considering audience interaction and the lack of plot and characters, I argue that broadcast stand-up discourse style is not quite on the same level as fictional dialogue and prefabricated orality. Notwithstanding both discourses being prefabricated

and acted, broadcast stand-up comedy has different aims than traditional audiovisual texts. However, it cannot be equated to everyday conversation as well for the same issues it shares with prefabricated orality, thus calling for more nuanced definitions.

## 5. Jocular Structure

Joke structure and its elements have been discussed by many both in the context of puns [Chiario 1992; Hockett 1977] and more elaborate and longer jokes [Attardo 2017; Nash 1985], such as humorous short stories or comedic conversations that go further than the classic scheme that one can find so profusely in canned jokes. However, since this study deals with longer humorous texts and their translation, I propose new terms to address techniques and schemes that are exclusive to the jocular structure of stand-up, drawing on the fundamental division in build-ups, punchlines and jablines.

Comedians often switch between different topics to keep the conversation humorous and stimulating, resorting to techniques of topic **transitioning**. Despite said strategies not being compulsory, it is uncommon for a performer to change topics abruptly in longer stand-up performances (such as the ones analyzed here) without adequate transitioning. Among these techniques, a popular strategy is to transition to a different topic by using a punchline.

In stand-up, the usual distinction between punchlines and jablines is inefficient when discussing transitioning punchlines. Jablines are weaved throughout a build-up, while punchlines are the climax of a build-up. Transitioning punchlines are in an awkward position in said distinction, since they both conclude a section and open another, as well as maintaining their status as jokes while being part of the following build-up. For the further discussion to be more precisely termed, the word employed here for topic transitioning is **chaining**, whether it includes a punchline or not. In more specific terms, the topic introduced via chaining will usually be connected to either:

- a) nouns, idioms or semantic elements of the punchline;
- b) the anecdote for the previous and/or subsequent build-up;
- c) reflections, general statements, recollections, crowd interaction, etc.

In Table 3, the excerpts provided exemplify type a), type b), and type c) chaining, respectively. Since transitioning implies a topic change, the

preference of performers for general rather than specific terms in chaining (in the corpus especially) resulted in adequate translation. The first examples, however, involves punning, which depending on its translation, could make the transition falter and dispersive. In the Italian subtitling, humor depends heavily on the audience's knowledge of basic English, yet it effectively aids the transition. Type b) and type c) chaining, instead, can more easily be substituted with target-oriented idioms (if needed), as they rely on conversational structures rather than punchlines.

TABLE 3. **Chaining**

SHOW	TOPICS	ENGLISH AUDIO	ITALIAN SUBTITLES
Gamble, <i>Blood Sugar</i>	Religion > Fitness	“Fuck it, I’ll carry the crucifix, make sure I’m double pumped up by the time I arrive.” That was the original CrossFit.	Morirò a torso nudo! “Al diavolo, porterò la croce, farò in modo di essere bello pompato!” È nato così il CrossFit.
Adams, <i>Serious Black Jumper</i>	Feminism > Celebrity culture	Cos the reason that you’re sat there listening to me is because I’m wearing a black turtleneck. Or the serious black jumper. You can have that.	Perché il motivo per cui siete lì seduti ad ascoltarmi è perché indosso un maglione nero a collo alto. O “un sobrio maglione nero”. Ve lo concedo.
Whitehall, <i>I’m Only Joking</i>	Diets > Personal life	And... drinking falafel milk. I’m just jealous of people for living the life that I want to live. I do it with everything. Like love-life.	E berrò latte di falafel. Sono solo invidioso di chi vive la vita che voglio vivere io. Lo faccio con tutto. Come la vita amorosa.

A similar process with a different purpose is what will be here defined as **hooking** or **hook** joke. Build-ups generally serve two purposes: setting up the necessary elements for a punchline and sharing the necessary information to make the humor come across. Of course, if this is applied

to stand-up routines, all while considering the different topics and their chaining, the said build-ups become a fertile ground for catchphrases or recurring jokes, which are kept consistently humorous throughout the performance by reminding of a previous joke and by being repeated in a new, fitting context. Some catch phrases abide by these rules, while some serve to reverse chaining and steer the conversation back to a previous topic.

This is a common technique that performers use to end their routines, as it reinforces a particular point the comedian wanted to make as well as the overall narrative façade of the show. Fitting examples of this come in the final passages of both *Blood Sugar* and *Serious Black Jumper*: in the former, a bassoon performance ties back to the opening topic/jokes; in the latter, it justifies the entire monologue. Additional occurrences can be observed in *I'm Only Joking*: “nut juice” and “normal guy” are each employed three times throughout the show, and in all but their first occurrences, the catchphrases are used out of their original, humorous context.

Ultimately, chaining and hooking are structural elements that allow stand-up performances to retain a narrative consequentiality of sort and allow the performance to flow naturally, respectively. Akin to the importance of adapting a scene that impacts the following scenes in the TT in filmic translation, translation of chaining and hooking eventually reverberates throughout the performances. This means that they require careful attention in translation, as well as coherent re-application of strategies: the translation of a catchphrase should prioritize its fitting in all hooking contexts rather than partially retaining humor; similarly, chaining should be prioritized as a cohesion device.

## 6. Conclusions

In this study, stand-up comedy has been discussed as an audiovisual text to address the genre's adaptation to the new, digital mediascape. Observations on the Italian subtitling lead to discussion on translation of cultural references in humor and highlighted the inconsistencies in the strategies employed, such as oscillation between literal translation and full foreignization.

Despite broadcast stand-up comedy being a live performance recorded, edited, and streamed online, this study demonstrates that it is not free of audiovisual elements, rather the comedians actually seem to take advantage of the hybrid nature of their performance to push the boundaries of a more

standard monologue in front of an audience, even if it means involving additional audiovisual texts – yet still prioritizing the audio-verbal mode above all, both in the English audio and Italian translation. The register and style of the performances, while still presenting striking resemblances to prefabricated orality and fictional dialogue, requires further study to address its nuances.

Finally, recurring discourse elements and joke structures in broadcast stand-up have been individuated and defined, and their translation reflects the underlying importance of keeping the monologue together rather than focusing on one, singular humorous utterance. Extensive analyses of these new concepts, in-depth study of stand-up dialogue on a wider corpus, and observations on the punctuation and formatting strategies in the subtitling are valid points for further study in order to grasp the intricacies of a live genre turning digital.

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## ABSTRACT

With the rise of new platforms of media consumptions, aided by new digital technologies, wider audiences and a growing demand for translated materials, new audiovisual transfer modes have surfaced and with them the field of AVT “has grown exponentially, parallel to the production, consumption, interaction with and general interest in audiovisual products” [Chaume 2018: 41]. Stand-up comedy usually thrives as a live form of art. However, digital consumption has allowed comedians to reach a global audience via recording and broadcasting of their performances, and by doing so, it warranted the translation of the genre. In this study, after investigating how the audiovisual format affects comedians’ performances and their subtitling into Italian, I propose new, potentially useful concepts for a translational analysis of broadcast stand-up. Included is a discussion of the presence of audiovisual elements in the streamed specials and an inquiry of the fictionality of the scripted dialogue.

**Keywords:** stand-up comedy, audiovisual translation, fictional dialogue, humour, subtitles