Oral self-translation of stand-up comedy:
From the mental text to performance and interaction

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

The present study investigates, from the point of view of translation, the phenomenon of stand-up comedians performing in more than one language, with a specific focus on English and Italian, and on Italian comedians performing in London. This offers the opportunity to address questions of humour translatability, to observe how performing in a native, as opposed to a second, language impacts performance, and to consider the role that humour and translation can play in situations of diaspora.

For these purposes, a new type of translation needs to be conceptualised for it to be recognised as taking place in bilingual comedy. In doing this, the starting point is the recognition that stand-up comedy represents a form of oral communication, in which the presence of a written text cannot be assumed. The type of translation putatively involved in bilingual stand-up comedy is thus defined as “oral self-translation”. The notion of “mental text”, borrowed from the ethnographer Honko (1996), is proposed as the source and target text of this type of translation. The concepts of declarative and procedural memories are then deployed to offer a theoretical model for the content of this mental text.

These challenges call for a phenomenological approach as the main method of this study, in which the experience of a sample of ten bilingual stand-up comedians is investigated by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The researcher’s own experience in performing stand-up comedy in both Italian and English is also reflexively interrogated and compared with the participants’ experiences, as collected in the interviews.

The results extrapolated from this data suggest that translation does occur in bilingual comedy and that its comic efficacy is considered very satisfactory by the performers themselves, in accordance with their interpretation of the audience’s reaction. This success seems to be correlated with the special degree of freedom enjoyed by the self-translating comedian. The choice of language, moreover, seems to be associated with different performing styles and different levels of emotional involvement from the comedian. In its interaction between performers and audience, oral self-translation of stand-up comedy is shown to partake in the process of “identity negotiation” (Swann 1987), particularly when this interaction occurs between members of a diaspora and members of the host community.
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### Abbreviations

In quotations from their interviews within the text, the names of the participants are abbreviated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Antonello Taurino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Federica Bonomi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FD</td>
<td>Francesco De Carlo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FF</td>
<td>Francis Foster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GD</td>
<td>Giada Garofalo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS</td>
<td>Katsura Sunshine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KV</td>
<td>Katerina Vrana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>Luca Cupani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB</td>
<td>Magnus Bertnér</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM</td>
<td>Romina Puma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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This thesis is dedicated to Katerina Vrana, with the best wishes for a prompt and full recovery.
1 Introduction

Former US President Jimmy Carter likes to tell the story of when, in front of a Japanese audience, he decided to open a speech with a mildly humorous remark, which produced a much bigger response than he was expecting. After the event, Carter asked his Japanese interpreter how the joke was translated, to which the interpreter replied that it was as follows: “President Carter told a funny story. Everyone must laugh.”

This episode is sometimes quoted as anecdotal evidence in favour of the popular belief that humour in translation “doesn’t travel well”. In an explicit attempt to challenge this belief, English comedian Eddie Izzard performed his 2016 tour Force Majeure Reloaded in English, French, German and Spanish. While his claims to have been the first stand-up comedian to perform regularly in more than one language are difficult to prove, there is no doubt that Izzard had the great merit of making this activity, and its possibility, readily available to a wider public. Indeed, the history of bilingual comedy still waits to be written, as is also the case of a synchronic sociological study of its spread and its connections with more general social phenomena such as globalisation and migration. The present study is neither historical nor strictly sociological in its aims; nor is it focused on the way bilingual comedy has recently become more visible in the media. Instead, its aim is to study this phenomenon within the scope of Translation Studies: to study whether, and how, stand-up comedians who perform in two languages, particularly those who do so in English and Italian, translate their own material; and what lessons can be derived from this for a better understanding of translation and humour.

From a more personal point of view, the idea of this study originated from my own experience as a London-based Italian who, at the time of embarking on this study, had already been performing comedy for more than six years, both in English and in Italian; this allowed me direct contact with other bilingual comedians, as well as with an audience consisting of both the Italian diaspora and the general British public. Moreover, during my participation in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, I met comedians visiting from Italy and observed, and sometimes assisted with, the process of translating their comedy material. At the same time, I became a regular

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2 This was not, however, Izzard’s first bilingual/multilingual show. Whitworth (2009) offers a comparative analysis of the DVD recordings of Izzard’s English shows Dress to kill (1998) and Circle (1999) and of the French show Dress to circle (2000).
performer at the comedy club Il Puma Londinese / London Puma (from now on: London Puma), in which Italian comedians perform their sets in Italian in front of an audience composed mainly of members of the Italian community in London, often in preparation for performing them in English in front of a predominantly British audience. It soon became clear to me that switching between two different languages involved both challenges and opportunities. At the same time, it was also clear that understanding these challenges and opportunities, and what was happening in the passage between the two languages, required interrogating both the experience of other performers and engaging with the theoretical and interpretative instruments currently available in Translation Studies. Moreover, it required developing new instruments. The crux of the matter is that, as will soon be argued more extensively, stand-up comedy represents an oral form of expression, while the theoretical instruments made available by the field of Translation Studies were developed to account for the translation of written texts (the relationship with the apparatus of Interpreting Studies is more complex, as will be discussed). A new type of translation needs to be conceptualised, which this study calls “oral self-translation”.

If the concept of oral self-translation will be theoretically constructed, and justified, in this study, the concepts of “bilingual stand-up comedians” and of “bilingual stand-up comedy” represent, instead, its primitive notions. This does not mean, however, that a terminological clarification cannot be attempted. Double (1991) already noted that “stand-up comedy” is “difficult to define, because it has undergone significant changes as it has evolved” (1991:3). Double then proceeds to discuss a series of presumably essential properties of stand-up comedy, such as its being performed by a solo performer or involving the participation of the audience, rejecting all of them in turn by means of mentioning counter-examples. Double’s conclusion is that “it can be said that stand-up comedy usually involves a single performer making the audience laugh by talking to it directly” (1990:3, original emphasis). The presence of counter-examples within the same chronological frame seems to suggest that the difficulty to define stand-up comedy is not only based on its changeability in time, but still occurs if seen from a synchronic perspective. Concepts used in natural language, as opposed to defined within the formal sciences, often show this “fuzziness” that defies every attempt to define them in terms of supposedly essential properties. It is in response to this general difficulty that Rosch (1973) proposed that concepts should be associated with a hierarchy of more or less “prototypical” properties, according to the degree in which that property makes the attribution
of individuals to that category easier for an observer. Applying this approach, the following can
be suggested as prototypical aspects of stand-up comedy:

- It is a form of comedy in which comedians perform standing up, hence the name. Romina Puma, a wheelchair user and a participant to this study, tells the story of meeting the Duke of Edinburgh, who quipped: “You are more of a sit-down comedian” (Romina Puma, personal communication). Indeed, this convention / expectation is sometimes challenged by performers.
- It is a form of comedy performed in front of a microphone, which represents the only “prop” used by the performer. As an example of a less prototypical case, comedian Wes Zaharuk made his lavish use of a wide array of props his comedic signature.
- It is a form of comedy in which the comedians perform as themselves, as opposed as performing characters. However, character comedians, such as the stereotypical caricature of a Frenchman Marcel Lucont (the creation of English comedian Alexis Dubus), are often part of stand-up comedy “bills” and can be considered as less prototypical cases. Moreover, there can be peripheral cases, such as that of Johnny Vegas (real name Michael Joseph Pennington), in which audience members are usually not aware that they are witnessing a character performance.
- It is a form of comedy in which comedians recognise the presence of the audience and are open to the interaction with them. Again, less prototypical cases are offered by those comedians who challenge this expectation.

On the contrary, the intention to make people laugh can be considered as a prototypical aspect, not of stand-up comedy in particular, but of comedy in general. By means of using the expression “a form of comedy”, the previous descriptions aim to capture how the prototypical aspects associated with the attribute of “stand-up” contribute to specify the concept of “comedy”, which is assumed.

The other term used as the starting point of this study, i.e. “bilingualism”, has been defined as “the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual” (Mackey 2000:22), which is the definition that will be used in this study. More specifically, in this study the expression “bilingual stand-up comedians” will indicate those stand-up comedians who alternate the use of two or more languages in their activity of performing stand-up comedy. Conversely, with “bilingual stand-up comedy” this study will mean the activity, from a specific performer, of alternating the use of two or more languages during their performing career. This does not, however, mean that the single, specific performance needs to be bilingual. On the contrary, if taken singularly, stand-up comedy performances from bilingual comedians are usually monolingual. Instead, what counts for the present purposes is the alternation of languages between performances. Instead, Leeds (1992), among others, represents a study of bilingual
humour defined as “the comic effect which arises when two languages are related in a certain way” (1992:130), such as bilingual puns. In turn, this needs to be distinguished from those cases in which a language is simply “spoken about” in another language, such as when Eddie Izzard derives humour from the oddities of French teaching or the complexity of the Latin grammar.

Having clarified the meaning of these primitive notions, this study’s research questions can now be expressed as follows:

**RQ1:** Do stand-up comedians who perform in more than one language transfer their own material across languages? If yes, does this constitute translation? And how can this translation be constructed?

**RQ2:** To what extent is this translation successful in eliciting the expected comic response from the audience?

**RQ3:** What implications, if any, has performing in different languages on the comedian’s performance?

**RQ4:** What implication, if any, has performing in different languages on the performers’ interaction with their audience?

The first question (RQ1) stems from a methodological suspension of judgement on whether the stand-up comedy produced by the bilingual comedian involves translating material or not. This suspension allows for a reflection on the conditions under which this specific type of translation can be said to occur. In turn, this requires a theoretical effort to account for the particular nature of the translation allegedly taking place.

The second question (RQ2) relates to the problem exemplified by the Jimmy Carter anecdote mentioned above: the problem of whether translating comedic content is successful and, if so, at what cost. Indeed, one aspect that makes that anecdote particularly interesting for the present purposes is that the Japanese interpreter’s translation was, from a strictly functional point of view, successful in producing the response desired by Carter, i.e. laughter. At the same time, this effect was obtained at the cost of such a level of distortion of the original message to make the re-narration of this event from Carter himself an instance itself of comic discourse. Similarly, Eddie Izzard’s often repeated suggestion that his multilingual comedic activity demonstrates the universality of humour calls for both empirical corroboration against a larger dataset than his own experience, and for a discussion of the conditions which make this supposed success possible, along with the limitations that circumscribe it. Indeed, while the
discussion of “effectiveness” might require a foray into the minefield of value judgements, it is necessary to connect this study to the more general debate on humour universality. As mentioned above, the prevailing pre-theoretical perception on this subject seems to be that humour “does not travel well”. If this were indeed the case, then it would be particularly true for the very context-dependent activity of stand-up comedy, which means that the discussion of its transferability, so to speak, can offer an important contribution to the debate on humour universality and hence to the field of Humour Studies.

The third question (RQ3) is aimed at investigating the possible implications of delivering stand-up comedy in two languages for what is customarily described as the comedian’s performance. Although the concept of performance is so pervasive in the discourse on live forms of expression that it is hardly avoidable, it is also a very difficult concept to define. The question of the implications of bilingual comedy for performance firstly implies the need to define what performance means in the context of the present study. Secondly, it calls for an investigation of the possible covariation of this more precisely defined element with the variation of the language in which it is expressed.

The fourth question (RQ4) focuses on the impact that oral self-translation of stand-up comedy might have on the interaction with the audience. Indeed, stand-up comedy has a strong interactional component, so much so that it is sometimes described, for instance by Rutter (1997), as a “conversation”. While this study contends that this conversational aspect has often led scholars to underestimate the function of a relatively stable content at the centre of this conversation, it also aims to avoid the opposite error of underestimating the importance of its more interactional aspects. This also means recognising that interaction always happens in a specific situation, which, in the case of bilingual stand-up comedy, often happens to be a diasporic situation, as is the case of the London-based Italian comedians who constitute most of this study’s sample. Indeed, if migration and globalisation are probably at the origin of the need for bilingual comedy, it is also worth investigating what bilingual comedy itself can bring to the table of the complex negations that these global phenomena require.

These research questions are addressed in the course of seven chapters, each including the discussion of the relevant literature. Indeed, answering these research questions can be supported by insights from linguistics, ethnography, translation, performance and humour studies. The recognition of the fact that stand-up comedy represents an oral form of communication means that the field of ethnography, which has dedicated much attention to
orality, can offer suggestions, concepts and theoretical approaches which can be very useful in its investigation. For example, Brodie (2009) analyses stand-up as an instance of folklore, while other authors who studied other forms of oral communication, such as song cycles, can also offer suggestions that are useful for the present purposes. In contrast, the field of Translation Studies has so far neglected oral performance. Conversely, ethnographic studies on oral traditions have neglected the very possibility that they might be the subject of translation. This study, then, aims to offer a contribution to building this missing bridge between studies on orality and studies on translation. Other areas of literature that will be reviewed and discussed with reference to the problems at hand are performance studies, immigration studies and philosophical discussions on identity. In this case too, what seem to be missing are the bridges. Questions of performance, for instance, have been very productively associated with questions of identity, most famously by Butler ([1993] 2011;1999), but the role that humour and translation, particularly in their correlation to each other, can play in this construction calls for more scholarly attention.

With regard to the content of the individual chapters, Chapter 1 is the present Introduction. Chapter 2 lays the foundations for a response to RQ1, by means of a theoretical discussion on how to define translation so as to facilitate its detection in the performing activity of bilingual comedians. In order to do so, first, stand-up is recognised as an oral form of expression. Second, its (still putative, at this stage) translation in bilingual comedy is recognised as a form of self-translation and the implications of this recognition are also discussed. The notion of “oral self-translation” is then proposed. Moreover, given that translation is customarily described as the transfer from a “source text” in one language to a “target text” in another language, the suggestion of the notion or oral self-translation requires the discussion of how the notion of “text” can be constructed in this case. The notion of “mental text” is then proposed to address this problem. Chapter 3 addresses the methodological challenges raised by this proposal and describes the methodological approach adopted in this study. In particular, the choice of conducting ten in-depth semi-structured interviews is in introduced and justified. Chapter 4, then, develops the notion of mental text by suggesting a theoretical model for it, which incorporates notions borrowed by the field of memory studies. With Chapter 5, instead, the focus moves from the theoretical modelling of the subject matter of oral self-translation to an empirical investigation of what happens during it, with specific reference to the challenges posed by the language and cultural differences. The result of this process is then discussed to assess its success or failure in terms of comic efficacy, thus addressing RQ2. The first half of
Chapter 6 addresses RQ3 by discussing the implications for performance. The chapter discusses what is meant with the term “performance” in this specific context, and how this specific meaning relates to the way this term is used in other contexts. This discussion leads to the term “performative” in relation to questions of identity, which offers a bridge, in the second part of Chapter 6, towards a discussion of the relational aspects of orally self-translating stand-up comedy, which addresses RQ4. Chapter 7 summarises the findings and suggests avenues for further research. Finally, Appendix A contains the transcriptions of the full interviews, which are also quoted throughout the entire study. Its last section, Appendix A.11, contains the list of all the themes which have been identified in the interviews, with pointers to the specific passages in which they appear. Most of these themes are also discussed in the chapters, but others are just identified as indicators of the richness of the data collected and as an invitation to further discussion.
In search of the text: oral self-translation of stand-up comedy and the concept of mental text

The study of the (putative, at this stage) translation activity within the context of bilingual stand-up comedy poses a series of challenging theoretical problems. Indeed, stand-up comedy seems to show all the characteristics of oral discourse, to the point that in the literature it has been effectively analysed as a form of conversation (Rutter 1997) or folklore (Brodie 2009). A theoretical justification for considering stand-up comedy an oral form of communication will be proposed in section 2.3, in which the alternative approach of identifying the text of stand-up with written texts will be discussed and rejected (pp. 26-31). Further arguments will also be offered in section 5.2 (pp.105-108). The present chapter, instead, will offer a discussion of what this recognition of orality entails for the study of stand-up comedy translation, with particular reference to the problem of what can be identified as the source and target text of this specific translation activity, as well as a discussion on what is entailed in defining this activity as self-translation. When available, the literature on these subjects will be reviewed, otherwise the gap will be identified. The study of orality, text and performance (separately or in their connections) has taken places in different fields, such as semiotics, ethnography and linguistics. Sections 2.1 (pp. 8-11), 2.2 (pp. 12-16) and 2.3 (pp. 16-36) offer an interdisciplinary review of this debate. In sections 2.4 (pp. 36-44) and 2.5 (pp. 45-50) the focus moves from text to translation (and, in terms of literature review, to the field of Translation Studies) with the discussion, first, of the implications of considering oral translation of stand-up comedy a form of self-translation and, secondly, of the concept of oral self-translation. Published interviews, biographies and scripts from stand-up comedians, although not collected with the express purpose of studying this subject and not part of the empirical evidence for this study, are also referenced when deemed useful to exemplify the topic at hand.

2.1 Orality and performance text

The concept of oral text and the problem of its relationship with the concept of performance have received some attention from the field of semiotics, particularly in Italy and Russia. The seminal work in this debate was Segre (1978), who proposed a classification of text types based on their different relationships with their context. Within this framework, Segre defines oral text as a text that is intrinsically bound to the context of its product and, as such, is not repeatable
(1978:133), offering the example of a conversation among friends (Ibid.). The same association between orality and unrepeatability is shared by De Marinis (1993) in his monograph on the semiotics of performance. While extending the notion of text to include the text of a performance, the main aim of De Marinis is, in fact, reconstructive: he is interested in possible ways to identify and recover the “text” of a specific theatre performance in time. Given this aim, it is not surprising that De Marinis’s performance text shares with Segre’s oral text the character of non-repeatability: in the terminology presented in section 2.3 of the present study (particularly at pp. 26-27), his performance text would, actually, not count as text at all, but as transcript.

A completely different approach, i.e. an approach which recognises an element of variation and repeatability, is proposed by Lotman (1980) with the notion of folkloric text, which he introduces by means of an analogy with games, in which a set of rules (for instance, the rules of chess) can produce different individual game sessions (1980:133). Another analogy used by Lotman (Ibid.) is with a musical score, which “produces” different individual executions. This notion appears very similar to the notion of mental text proposed by Honko (1996), which is discussed in section 2.3 at pp. 31-34: in both cases, in fact, the productivity of the oral/performance text, i.e. the capacity to enable the production of new performances, is recognised as the most important phenomenon that a theory of orality/performance needs to account for. The oral text, then, is neither reconstruction of a past event, as it is according to De Marinis (1993), nor is the source of an unrepeatable occurrence in the here and now, as proposed by Segre (1978), but is what enables new performances in the future. As is also discussed in greater detail in section 2.3 at pp.31-34, this theoretical approach appears to be the only one that can do justice to what is common among the different performances of the same “thing”, for instance among the different performances of the same Edinburgh show, and to the phenomenological observation that the comedian approaches the stage not as “a blank slate” but with specific verbal intentions in mind. Moreover, the other notions, which conflate text and transcript and/or attribute the character of unrepeatability to the product of this conflation, would be of no theoretical use for the study of oral self-translation. If the text of an oral performance, in fact, was deemed unrepeatable and undistinguishable from the transcript of an individual performance in time, it would not be possible to identify in this text the potential source of the activity of self-translation performed by the comedian, given that the very aim of this activity is to enable future performances in the target language. A reductio ad absurdatum of this line of approach is offered by the hypothetical case when, during the transcribed
performance, the comedian has to address the problem of a very disturbing latecomer: if the text was nothing else than the transcript, the translation into the target performance would need to include this very interaction, even in the absence of any actual latecomer. The distinction between text and transcript will be expanded in section 2.3 (particularly at pp. 26-27), but for now it should suffice to say that, even in the absence of a written text, comedians do not seem to find the starting point of their self-translation in the performances themselves, which usually include elements that are context-dependent and not repeatable, but in that elusive “something” that is behind the production of these performances and makes this production possible. That “something”, it will be argued, is the oral text or mental text, with the term mental text preferable for the very reason that it seems to suggest more clearly the idea of a “productive” competence.

A similar and related problem is represented by the relationship between oral performance and spontaneity. A conflation of these notions can be found in the discussion of the humour technique of expansion offered by Nash (1985), which he defines as “a verbally exuberant flowering of comic ideas” (1985:17). According to Nash, only written humour can allow for a great degree of expansion, since for him only a written form allows for the storing of a great level of detail (1985:21). Nash offers two examples: a group of people trading jokes in conversation and a “club comedian” (1985:21); according to Nash, the only way even the club comedian can “expand” is by adding joke to joke on the same subject (Ibid.). This analysis is inevitably influenced by the type of comedy that still represented the mainstream at the time of writing, which was mainly based on delivering a sequence of short “canned jokes”. This impression is reinforced by another passage, in which Nash lists “the lay figures of the stage comedian’s stock – e.g. the nagging mother-in-law, the idle husband, the spendthrift wife” (1985:62). However, contrary to Nash’s experience, and with the benefit of hindsight, mentioning Eddie Izzard would be enough to offer the counter-example of a contemporary comedian who made expansion within the same joke, or better within the same comic narrative, the very trademark of his style. The idea that oral forms cannot allow for a great level of detail is, then, a consequence of the implicit assumption that oral production happens spontaneously, in other words it is, again, a consequence of not recognising the existence of a repeatable text behind oral performances. Even allowing for differences in style and personality, stand-up comedians, in fact, tend to spend many hours developing, memorising and rehearsing their material, as is repeatedly discussed in the course of the interviews with this study’s participants. It is revealing in this sense that a joke often heard among the comedians
themselves is that “spontaneity is the most important thing: if you can fake it, your job is done”. This admission of artifice does not imply that the freedom to interact with the audience and to improvise on stage should not be recognised as an important aspect of this essentially oral form, but it means that identifying all forms of orality with the product of spontaneity is hardly justifiable.

This view is consistent with the latest developments in the debate about the nature of orality itself. While earlier studies, in fact, as exemplified by Ong (1982), saw oral forms of expressions as radically different in nature from written forms, Carr (2005) proposed a new paradigm, which he called “oral-written interface” (2005:4). The proposal consists of interpreting the writings of the ancient Greeks, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and of the people of ancient Israel, as tools to enable the oral transmission of the texts, particularly by assisting memorisation. In other words, in ancient times writing was mainly seen as “writing on the tablet of the heart” (2005:127). This corresponds to the way stand-up comedians tend to make use of their own written scripts and notes, as is shown, for instance, in the discussion with participant Giada Garofalo in Appendix A.1.1 and Appendix A.1.2, respectively. This topic is made even more explicit in this passage from the interview with Katerina Vrana³:

GP – What can you tell me about your writing process?

KV – I don’t write.

GP – Not even bullet points?

KV – No, I keep everything in my mind. Actually, I also use recordings: every solo show I have done, it’s recorded. So, if I haven’t performed a specific show for a while, I have to sit through an hour and a half of myself. At that stage, I might write something down as a reminder, but I cannot do it while I am still developing the material, because otherwise it becomes too mechanical. I like to be able to move things around. I only bring to the stage a list of bullet points (so, I don’t use them when I’m writing new material, but I do use them later on). (KV:2145-2153)

In this passage, we can see a concrete instance of the distinction between writing (in the stricter sense, i.e. on paper and/or digitally) as a means of composition, which does not seem to happen in this case, and writing as a means to help the later recollection of something originally written “on the tablet of the heart”.

³ The size, composition and selection criteria of the participant sample for this study are illustrated below in section 3.2, at pp. 55-59.
2.2 The notion of oral self-translation

While the existence of an interface between oral forms and written forms is recognised in the more recent literature, the same recognition does not seem to extend to the relationship between written and oral forms of translation. Instead, oral translation appears to have been ignored by the field of translation studies. This gap was pointed out very clearly by Tymoczko (1990), albeit with specific reference to literary translation:

[...it is notable that rarely if ever in discussions of translation theory practice are there cited examples of interlingual literary translation in oral tradition. Our discussion of the practice and theory of interlingual literary translation generally presuppose the presence of fixed source texts and the generation of fixed translated texts. (1990:53)

One of the few exceptions mentioned by Tymoczko is the classic ethnological memoir by Bohannan (1966) on her attempt to orally translate Hamlet for an illiterate tribe of bush hunters. Tymoczko’s own contribution, moreover, is her discussion of how the medieval Historia Regum Britanniae originated as a Latin written translation of oral Welsh legends. In all these cases, however, a written text is present either as source (Hamlet, in Bohannan’s case) or as target (the Historia Regum Britanniae, in Tymoczko’s). What still needs to be discussed is the possibility of a form of translation that is oral with regard to both in its source and its target.

In order to justify this form of purely oral translation as a distinct object of study, it is important to distinguish it from interpreting. Reiss, Vermeer et al. (2013), while rejecting that the distinction between translation and interpreting should be found along the written / oral dimension (2013:14), offer an alternative formal distinction based on the concept of correctability: in interpreting, “the source text is presented only once, the target text cannot be compared with the source text various times and is not available for later revisions” (2013:12), while in translation the opposite occurs. Applying this definition to the type of oral transfer that, as will soon be clear from the analysis of the interviews and as is also reflexively confirmed by my own experience, we can observe in the activity of bilingual comedians, it will also appear clear that this transfer represents a progressive and interactive process, in which different translations “of the same thing” (the nature of which, again, will be discussed below) are often proposed to the tribunal of the audience in the continuous search for the most effective solution. Whatever that “thing” is, in other words, it seems to be present more than once to the translators’ attention, allowing for potentially improved translations. Under the definition
proposed by Reiss, Vermeer et al. (2013), then, the type of oral transfer investigated in this study constitutes indeed a form of translation, although oral, and not of interpreting. There are also, however, important similarities between interpreting and oral self-translation. In particular, in section 4.3, at pp. 93-95, the notion of a mental model of a discourse situation, originally proposed by Johnson-Laird (1983) and applied by Setton (1999) to simultaneous interpreting, will be shown as equally productive for the understanding of oral self-translation.

After the distinction from interpreting, a second problem that needs to be addressed is the relationship between the candidate notion of oral translation and the more specific notion of oral self-translation, which represents the focus of the present study. In other words, the question is whether oral self-translation represents the only possible form of oral translation or whether allographic (as “the other type” of translation is usually called in the literature on self-translation⁴) oral translation is also possible. Even imagining what the latter form of translation would look like, however, appears problematic. Remaining within the example of stand-up comedy, allographic oral translation might be involved in the hypothetical case in which a stand-up comedian wanted to orally transfer the “text” of one of his or her shows to another comedian, who will perform it in a different language. This hypothetical transfer, however, would require either the former comedian to first translate the show and then orally transmit it to the latter comedian in the target language or, more probably, for the receiving comedian (who is more likely to have the required linguistic competence) to receive the verbal transmission in the source language first, and then perform the translation themselves. In both cases, we are still in the realm of self-translation. A more theoretically grounded explanation for this impossibility will be offered when, in section 2.3, at pp.31-33, the concept of mental text will be introduced as the source of oral self-translation. If the source text of oral translation resides in the translator’s mind, as will be argued, then the impossibility of allographic oral translation will result to be a consequence of the impossibility of “reading” other people’s minds. Oral self-translation, then, once it is formally distinguished from interpreting, appears to be the only possible form of oral translation.

Even if the focus is limited to oral self-translation, however, there still seems to be a gap in the literature. Indeed, studies on oral discourse and self-translation focus predominantly on what we might call oral-to-written self-translation: a form of self-translation where instances of oral traditions in the source language are translated into a written text in the target language. Akai

⁴ For instance, in Anselmi (2012).
(1997), for instance, describes West Indian writers as both *transcribing* and *translating* into English the narratives of the originally oral Creole story-telling. The author explicitly uses the terms “self-translation” to describe this process (1997:3), but “self” is meant in that context as indicating the entire linguistic community, for which the writer assumes the role, so to speak, of the designated scribe. A similar process, although on a more personal level, is identified by Wilson (2011) with reference to the contemporary Algerian-born Italian writer Amara Lakhous:

Further, by inscribing within written Italian the trace of oral Arabic, Lakhous creates a double palimpsest: not only, as he says, does he ‘Arabize Italian and Italinize Arabic’, he also arguably performs an intermodal translation (oral into written). (Wilson 2011:239)

Conversely, what Stibbard (1998) and Heltai (1989) call “oral translation”, and Dragsted & Hansen (2009) call “sight translation”, refers to a form of translation which is orally performed, for instance in the class by language students, but which uses as its source written texts, hence representing a form of *written-to-oral* translation. Unlike oral-to-written and written-to-oral translation as described above, stand-up comedians perform a form of self-translation that is oral both in its source and its target. Intriguingly, the New Testament translation scholar James A. Maxey published a monograph entitled *From orality to orality* (Maxey 2009). The aim of Maxey’s study is to identify a New Testament translation that can be considered effective for a predominately oral context, such as that represented by the Vuté People of Cameroon. His suggestion is that this form of translation should have the effectiveness of *oral* performance as its main objective. Moreover, Maxey underlines that the New Testament itself was the product of a predominantly oral culture and was written with oral performance in mind. Translating the New Testament for oral performance, then, means going from orality to orality. However, unless one is ready to stretch the context of the *self* to the entire Christian community and to allow for a single act of translation that spans across millennia, this represents a form of *allographic* oral-to-oral translation, not of oral-to-oral self-translation.

This excursus into the remote past puts the case of the orally self-translating stand-up comedian in sharp contrast. What seems hardly believable is that stand-up comedians should represent a completely unique case in the entire field of human communication. On the contrary, an entire and, of course, purely hypothetical *history* of this activity might be imagined. Performers of *Commedia dell’arte* in 16th and 17th century Italy, for instance, moved inside a linguistic landscape that, at least at the oral and popular level, was highly localised, a fact that might have
required some form of self-translation of their oral performances. Even more intriguingly, some of them moved to France to establish the first incarnation of the *Comédie-Italienne*. The story of this migration is told by Scott (1990), who writes:

> It was true that many members of the Paris audience did not understand Italian and that over the span of thirty-five years the Italian improvisers — some of them — learned to *memorise* and began to perform scenes and some complete plays *written* in French. (1990:8, emphasis added)

This passage, as becomes clear from the added emphasis, seems to suggest one more instance of oral-to-written translation. This impression is enforced by the fact that the author qualifies his statement by adding that “as late as 1696, the Italian actors continued to improvise complete entertainments in Italian” (Scott 1990:8). It will probably be farfetched, however, to conclude from this asymmetry that their French performances were completely scripted, just as it is clear, as shown above in section 2.3, at p.21, with a quote from the very same study, that their “improvisations” in Italian were actually not completely improvised. A conjecture that performances in a non-native tongue might be more scripted than those in the native one might be perfectly reasonable.⁵ That conceded, it would be a mistake to imagine a drastic and necessary distinction, which would preclude both these historic Italian *commedianti* performing in French, and modern day stand-up comedians performing in their second language, from the very possibility of saving that fluidity of performance that, as will soon be argued, seems to represent such an essential part of their form of expression. This apparent asymmetry, instead, might be at least partly due to a problem of historical perspective: the written texts of the plays, or at least some of them, have survived, while the “improvisations” of the performers obviously have not. Oral discourse belongs to the present only, which makes any *history* of it purely conjectural.

There is, however, a passage from the same study that seems to reveal the traces of oral-to-oral self-translation and that deserves to be quoted at length. With reference to a specific play of the repertoire, Scott writes:

> The play is in Italian style and has few points of resemblance to other works attributed to the same playwright, Monsieur D***, with the exception of the scenes included in the 1694 edition. What to conclude from this? The possibility at least exists that ‘Colombine avocat pour et contre’ included far fewer French

⁵ The verification of this conjecture will be part of the empirical research. My personal experience as a bilingual stand-up comedian, in any case, is fully consistent with it.
According to the passage, in other words, the *commedia* used the original written text of the play in French only as a starting point, but then developed their material orally in Italian, by playing it. Later, they self-translated their new material into French, again solely "on the stage" and thus orally, with the resulting later written edition of the play representing only a transcription of what was developed and translated on the stage. Contemporary bilingual stand-up comedians might therefore be seen as a "surviving tribe" of a sort, through which we can observe this arguably much more ancient phenomenon of oral-to-oral self-translation.

The question, however, is how we can make any theoretical sense of such a notion. Two main problems need to be investigated. Firstly, the problem of what is translated into what, given that both the source and the target of this form of translation share the fluidity of oral communication, in which every performance is to some degree different from any other performance. In other words, this is the problem of what constitutes the *text* of stand-up comedy. Secondly, self-translation itself represents a problematic area, given its uncertain status as translation-or-rewriting and the exceptional *authorial freedom* that it seems to allow the translator.

In other words, one problem hinges on the fact that oral self-translation operates on a constantly shifting ground, and the other problem on the fact that self-translation itself constantly shifts that ground even further. They will be investigated in turn as separate problems but, just as they seem to aggravate each other at the moment of their formulation, it will soon be clear that their reciprocal interference can also be exploited to the researcher’s theoretical advantage.

### 2.3 The search for the text and the notion of mental text

Once established that self-translation of stand-up comedy can be considered as an instance of oral translation, the question arises of what can be identified as the source and target text of this translation activity. More generally speaking, the question is what constitutes the *text* of stand-up comedy itself. In order to evaluate the possible solutions, the desiderata for a satisfactory theory of text in stand-up comedy will be outlined, then some candidates will be
evaluated against these desiderata and, finally, the conclusions will be drawn and a proposal for
the notion of text in stand-up comedy will be presented.

First of all, however, the very relevance and feasibility of searching for the text of stand-up
needs to be discussed. In what is still one of the most detailed, convincing and quoted academic
studies on the subject, Rutter (1997) applies the method of conversation analysis to analyse the
conversational mechanisms of stand-up comedy, uncovering in the process what he sees as its
essentially interactive nature. From this discovery Rutter derives the following conclusion on the
relevance of the notion of text in this area of investigation:

Traditional text-based analyses cannot record, and therefore facilitate, the
exploration of the interactive nature of humour. They do not incorporate even
basic but important features such as pace, laughter duration, overlap, intonation,
and so forth. (Rutter 1997:291)

The first, most obvious comment on these remarks is that they do not apply to a study, such as
the present one that does not aim for “an understanding of stand-up comedy” (Rutter
1997:291) in general, but for an understanding of self-translation in stand-up comedy, a pursuit
in which questions of text become hardly avoidable. Despite this, however, the points raised in
the quoted passage are of great interest for a general discussion on the notion of text in stand-
up comedy and, as such, will require further discussion.

The importance of interaction in stand-up would be very difficult to deny. The question,
however, is what the comedians bring to this interaction, apart of course from their personality,
history and attitudes. It is not, in fact, as a blank slate of conversational intentions that the
comedians approach the stage. On the contrary, they approach it with the intention of having a
specific type of conversation, a conversation with a specific content. In other words, if it is true
that “it is how you say it”, to quote a well-known adage about jokes, there must also be an “it”
that is said.

Rutter does not deny all this, but considers the content of what is said as less relevant than
other aspects of the stand-up comedy “conversation”. An example he cites as evidence to this
point is the episode of a Big Issue reviewer joining the general laughter for a joke during a
performance from Johnny Vegas, and reporting this experience in his review along with a
transcription of the joke, despite completely misunderstanding the content of the joke itself
(1997:196). While interestingly revealing of the contagious and social nature of laughter, this
example clearly represents an extreme case and can only be viewed as an exception to what
goes on in the comedy room. It will be difficult, in fact, to deny that behind the laughter from most people in the room there needs to be at least some common understanding of what is said, otherwise the very nature of conversation of stand-up comedy would be lost, since it would be a conversation apropos of nothing. There is some evidence that a comedian can elicit laughter in the room even when performing in a language that the vast majority of audience members do not understand. For instance, comedian Giada Garofalo described to me the experience of performing in Italian at a performance of the “Alternative Comedy Memorial Society” at the Edinburgh Fringe 2013, hence in front of an audience that for the most part did not understand Italian, eliciting laughter from the very incongruity of this situation (Giada Garofalo, oral communication). Moreover, at the Edinburgh Fringe 2015, comedian Louise Reay did an entire show in Chinese, entitled It’s only words, which was explicitly targeted to people who did not speak that language (sadly, her reliance on visual gags made it an arguably less interesting experiment than it could have been). This conceded, it would be really far-fetched to argue that this laughter has the same frequency, nature and motivations as the laughter provoked in a “normal” situation.

The recognition of the conversational nature of stand-up, on the other hand, instead of undermining the importance of questions of text in this context, can be very useful in identifying the right desiderata for a theory of it: what is needed is a notion of text that is compatible with or, even better, can account for this very conversational nature. Rutter, on the contrary, seems to identify text with “a transcription of the words said” (1997:291). It will be shown later that such a notion will not, indeed, satisfy the desiderata for a notion of text suitable to stand-up comedy, but it will also be argued that this identification is far from being unavoidable and that its failure is, instead, just an indication for the need to look somewhere else. Similarly, Rutter seems to equate text with joke text, while it will be argued below in this same section that this describes only one of the forms that text can assume in stand-up comedy.

After arguing that the search for the text of stand-up comedy is both legitimate and relevant, the discussion needs to proceed to how we will recognise that text when we see it, so to speak. The search for the defining criteria of text is the main goal of the field of text linguistics. The most canonical work in this field is Beaugrande & Dressler (1981), which proposes seven standards of textuality. These standards can be summarised as follow:

1. Cohesion: for something to be a text, its lexical elements cannot be completely unrelated at the linguistic level, but its words will need to follow syntactic rules to form sentences and its
sentences will need to be related to each other by other linguistics means, for instance recurrence.

2. **Coherence**: this standard can be seen as the equivalent of cohesion but at the underlying semantic level: for something to be a text, the *meanings* expressed by its elements cannot be completely unrelated.

3. **Intentionality**: for something to be a text, its cohesion and coherence should be the result of an *intention* from the *producer* to achieve a specific goal.

4. **Acceptability**: for something to be a text, its cohesion and coherence should be seen by the *receiver* as something fulfilling one or more of his or her goals.

5. **Informativity**: for something to be a text, it will need to convey to the receiver something that is *unexpected* or *unknown*.

6. **Situationality**: for something to be a text, it will need to be seen by the receiver as *relevant* to the situation of its occurrence.

7. **Intertextuality**: for something to be a text, its production and reception will need to be dependent to some extent to the knowledge of other texts.

These *standards* will also be kept in mind when evaluating different candidates for the notion of *text* in stand-up comedy.

The criteria for textuality just presented can be applied to describe all forms of text. In their generality, they will thus need to be complemented with something that can capture the specific nature of stand-up comedy, i.e. the fact that it represents a form of oral communication. Some help in this sense is offered by the field of *anthropological linguistics*, particularly by research on oral traditions. For instance, Barber (2003) writes:

> In oral traditions the co-presentation of performance and text is of course more difficult to see, because there is no visible, tangible document to contrast with the evanescent utterance. Nonetheless, it is clear that what happens in most oral performances is not pure instantaneity, pure evanescence, pure emergence and disappearance into the vanishing moment. The exact contrary is usually the case. There is a performance – but it is a performance of something. Something identifiable is understood to have pre-existed the moment of utterance. Or, alternatively, something is understood to be constituted in utterance that can be abstracted or detached from the immediate context and re-embodied in a future performance. Even if the only place this “something” can be held to exist is in
people’s minds or memories, still it is surely distinguishable from immediate, and immediately-disappearing, actual utterance. (Barber 2003:325)

The same dialectic is detected by Scott (1990) with regard to *Commedia dell’arte*:

> It was improvisation that created the acting style that made commedia dell’arte famous at home and welcome throughout Europe, a style characterised by energy, concentration and ensemble play. But it was the use of the tipi fissi [fixed characters] that made improvisation possible. (1990:5)

The text of stand-up comedy, in other words, needs to be “something” that is *revealed* in the oral performances of it and, at the same time, that makes these performances possible, by offering an invariant core behind the variations and improvisations allowed by its oral nature. In this search for this text that underlies the performances, what is needed is to look at how the comedy performances themselves are developed through a process of *variation* and *consolidation*. *Consolidation* here is meant as the process through which a variation is “positively reinforced” by the audience response and hence becomes part of the repeatable part of the performance.\(^6\) Scott (1990), in a passage quoted on this same page, talks of *accumulation*, but this notion is purely quantitative; it does not capture the fact that a variation of a single punch line, for instance, might or might not be preserved. To be valid, a theory of the text behind these performances will then need to be consistent with this process and offer a satisfactory account for it.

An example of this process can be found in the second autobiographical book by comedian Frank Skinner (2008), entitled *On the road*, in which the author describes in great detail the experience of going back to live stand-up comedy, after a ten year absence, with a new Edinburgh show followed by a tour. He reports the following:

> As preparation for these Edinburgh shows and the impending tours, I did thirty-four new material slots, varying in length between ten minutes to half an hour, at various small comedy clubs all over London. I wrote all the stuff myself and, after each gig, I went through the night’s set ticking the jokes that worked, crossing the jokes that failed and question-marking the ones that did neither. Sometimes, a bit of rejigging promotes these latter gags into the ticks column, but they don’t get many chances. They are on a yellow card. I would say that 80 per cent of question marks end up taking an early bath. On the plus-side, my post-gig analysis usually

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\(^6\) Other factors, apart from the positive reinforcement derived from the audience response, are also probably at play in consolidation. One extra factor, for instance, might be the reinforcing power or repetition on the performer’s memory. The relationship between text, performance and memory is discussed in Chapter 4.
reminds me of a few ad-libs that went well and which now can be added to the list. These jokes arrive with the ticks already attached. (Skinner 2008:27-28)

This passage shows how stand-up comedians usually start with a tentative written “script” of their set, either a fully written up one or just a list of subjects, in order to produce a series of performances that are presented to the tribunal of the audience. The reactions of the audience are then fed back into the script. In this preparatory stage this script is very fluid, but Skinner himself reminds his readers of the need to reach some sort of consolidation along this process, a stable state of sort, although associated with a certain level of variation:

I know ALL stand-ups do, more or less, the same show every night, but that doesn’t stop me feeling embarrassed about it. Anyway, it has to be done. You write a routine for a TV show; you do it once; it’s gone. You never get the chance to explore its potential; to let improvised additions blossom and grow; to develop the dexterity, the certainty of delivery, that is honed by repetition; to find its less-obvious magical places. (Skinner 2008:59)

Again the similarity with Commedia dell’arte is clear, as can be seen from this passage from Scott (1990):

Like all theatrical companies of the period, commedia dell’arte troupe played a repertory, an accumulation of entertainments, and there is every reason to believe that once a particular piece had been worked out to the satisfaction of all through improvisation, it joined the repertory to be played as finished work. (1990:5)

In other words, as already mentioned, there can be continuous variations only if there is a core on which these variations are variations. Further details about the ratio between new and old material in a well-rehearsed set are offered by the following account from another comedian, Steve Martin (2007):

When I had new material to try, I would break it down into its smallest elements, literally a gesture of a few words, then sneak it into the act in its shortest form, being careful not to disrupt the flow of the show. If it worked, the next night I would add the next discreet (sic) packet until the bit either filled out or died. (2007:143)
While appearing very cautious in the previous passage, Martin’s account also contains a very powerful reminder of the need, for a stand-up comedian, to strike the right balance. When describing a later stage of his comedy career, Martin writes:

The act was shifting into automatic. The choreography was in place, and all I had to do was fulfil it. I was performing a litany of immediate old favorites, and the laughs, rather than being the result of spontaneous combustion, now seemed to roll in like waves created far out at sea. (2008:181)

To summarise, whatever the text of stand-up comedy is, these examples of its development in performance suggest that it exists in this delicate balance between constant variation and necessary consolidation, between its always appearing “here and now” and its necessary warranty of repeatability. A contribution to understanding how this balance is achieved is offered by the notion – borrowed, again, from the field of anthropological linguistics – of *entextualization*, defined as the “process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (Silverstein & Urban 1996:25). This idea of detachment from the context seems to capture almost surprisingly well what comedians tend to call “writing on the stage”7, that is to say the action of capturing something that happens in the “here and now” of the performance, for instance the ad-libs mentioned by Skinner (2008) in the passage previously quoted, and making it part of the repeatable text.

This is not to say, however, that the notion of entextualisation captures *all* that goes on in the genesis of the stand-up comedy text. On the contrary, the opposite process identified by Silverstein & Urban (1996) and Barber (2003), i.e. *contextualisation* - in which something originally context-independent, and hence repeatable, is instead made context-specific – can also be observed at work. While one of the forms assumed by entextualisation consists, for instance, of replacing the first person with the third person (Barber 2003:326), Steve Martin (2007), in fact, recounts doing exactly the opposite, thus showing contextualisation at work:

I came up with several schemas for developing material. “I laugh in life”, I thought, “so why not observe what makes me laugh?” And if I did spot something that was funny, I decided not to just describe it as happening to someone else, but to translate it into the first person, so it was happening to me. A guy didn’t walk into a bar, I did. I didn’t want to it to appear that others were nuts; I wanted it to appear that I was nuts. (2007:73)

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7 The interviews in Ajaye (2002), for instance, contain many occurrences of this expression.
Another technique of entextualisation mentioned by Barber (2003) consists of setting the events narrated in a remote past. Again, in stand-up comedy the exact opposite act, i.e. contextualisation, seems to occur: the events reported by the comedians, regardless of when they really occurred, are usually transposed to the equally mythical but contextually proximate time of “while coming here”, “yesterday” or, at most and with a particularly high frequency, “the other day”.

As well as this sort of modernisation, contextualisation also assumes its special correlate aspect of localisation. A well-known habit of touring comedians is picking up a local newspaper in every town in order to add to their set some local reference. Interestingly, Scott (1990) imagines that something very similar must have happened at the time of Commedia dell’arte. After reminding us, as quoted above, that performers had a relatively established repertory, Scott (1990) adds:

On the other hand, the possibility of improvisation always must have been present in the consciousness of the actors, who no doubt continued to improve on their work with a new joke, an unexpected punch line, or a reference to a local scandal picked up that morning in the tavern. (1990:5)

The stand-up comedy text, it appears, is thus produced “in the middle“, by entextualising what is too context-specific and contextualising what is too generic, typically by adding references to the comedians themselves, who after all are the only element of context that is guaranteed to be present in all their performances.

The recognition that there is a process of variation and consolidation going on leads to the question of what, exactly, varies and consolidates in this process – in other words the question of what the structural elements of stand-up comedy are. The following taxonomy / terminology has been derived from the usage of these terms from the comedians themselves, evidence of which can be found in many autobiographical books and comedy manuals, including some of those quoted below. Moreover, I have found it in my experience very useful to think in these terms when writing and performing stand-up comedy. The existing literature on stand-up comedy, on the contrary, seems to have overlooked the problem of its structural elements. The most systematic analysis of it so far is offered by Rutter (1997), but the fact that his investigation of stand-up is conducted in the light of conversational analysis results in an uneven

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8 The borrowing of terms from the area of translation is not accidental. The reasons for doing so will be made clear in the next sections.
attention dedicated to, on the one hand, the dynamic elements of comedic discourse, such as *openings, closings* and *transitions*, which are analysed in great detail and, on the other, the static or more properly structural elements of it, such as *sets* and *routines*, which are virtually ignored.

From the more encompassing to the more basic, we can identify the following elements:

**Set**

A *set* is a sequence of *routines* and the *links* that connect them.\(^9\) It also includes an *introduction* and a *closing*. Its length goes from five minutes (sets for “open mic” nights or competitions) to a couple of hours for a typical tour show, passing through the 20 minutes of a typical professional club opening set, the 40 minutes for a typical professional club closing set and the 50-60 minutes of the typical festival set. In the latter case, as well as in the case of even longer tour sets, this is also commonly called a *show*, as in “My new show for Edinburgh is about Wagner”.

**Introduction**

Comedians typically introduce themselves, often with clichéd expressions such as “I know what you are thinking: here is the love child between X and Z”. The need to do so is, of course, more acutely felt when the comedian performs in a club night than when they perform for a festival or a tour, where the audience might be expected to know in advance something about the performer. Most comedians tend to always introduce themselves with the same words, using these words as some sort of signature. This introductory part of the set often also includes some recognition of the compère and/or of the environment in which the show takes places. Obviously, this latter part is situation-specific, although very experienced comedians might have an entire arsenal of supposedly “spontaneous” observations to produce when the right situation arises.

**Routine**\(^10\)

A *routine* is a sequence of interconnected *jokes*, typically on the same subject. For instance, Eddie Izzard’s show *Circle* contains the famous “Death Star Canteen” routine. In this specific

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\(^9\) On the other hand, a *spot* is a chunk of time offered by a comedy promoter, club owner, festival organiser etc. for a comedian to perform a *set*. It is obviously linked to the concept of *set* but should not be confused with it, as is shown by the following sentence: “I was offered a 20-minute *spot* from the Comedy Store but I’m afraid I might not have a 20 set for it yet” or “I got two ten minutes *spots* from the same promoter, can I do the same *set*?”.

\(^10\) The word “routine” is often used in the literature (see for instance O’ Brien 2006) to indicate what here, instead, we prefer to call a “set”. I think, however, that the definitions proposed here match more closely the way comedians themselves tend to use these words. Moreover, the present terminology is more expressive, given that the alternative terminology would still require a word to express what is called “routine” here.
case the cohesive element seems to be represented by some type of narrative, but in other
cases it might be represented by a different type of connection, for instance logical or
associative. As a result, some routines might appear more cohesive than others or, in other
terms, they might be more easily recognisable as routines. Another characteristic of routines,
which constitutes one more reason why they should be distinguished as a separate from set, is
that they are often re-used as part of different sets, i.e. in different combinations with other
routines.

Link

A link is something that connects the routines to each other, often by using clichéd expressions
such as: “this reminds me of...”, “the other day...”, “while I was coming here...”, “you will not
believe what happened to me today...”.

Set list

A set list is a sequence of titles for all the routines that will constitute a specific set. Sometimes it
also includes the links. Many comedians like to write the set list on their hands, but when the
set is well-rehearsed its list is usually memorised. Considering that it serves a primarily
mnemonic function and that it is constituted by “pointers” to specific parts of the text, i.e. to
the routines, it might actually be argued that set lists actually belong to the realm of the
metatext instead of that of the text itself.

Punch lines

For the time being, punch lines will constitute the undefined primitive elements of a comedy
text, leaving an investigation about their content and form to section 4.2 at pp. 85-88. For now,
it should suffice to say that punch lines are, obviously, the parts of the comedian’s performance
after which they expect / hope to produce laughter as the response from the audience. For the
purposes of this study, the notion of punch line is considered more precise and theoretically
productive than the notion of joke, which, as discussed again in section 4.2, particularly at pp.
85-86, is fraught with potentially dangerous ambiguity. For these reasons, when discussing
translation, the focus will be on punch lines over jokes. However, once punch lines are defined,
a derived (as opposed to primitive) definition of joke can be proposed, as the portion of
discourse that ends with a punch line (its internal, lower limit) and also comprises the portion of
discourse (also known as the setup) that precedes this punch line and follows the previous one.
This allows, for instance, the definition above of *routine* as a sequence of related jokes.

If these are elements that articulate the stand-up comedy discourse, the text of stand-up comedy will need to be something that contains, or is capable of accounting for, all or some of them. Once the structural elements of what is needed for the notion of text in stand-up comedy are thus defined, it is time to consider some specific candidates in the light of these requirements.

The first of these candidate solutions to be considered will be the *transcript* of the performance. Stand-up comedian Stewart Lee (2010) offers readers a very precious document: a collection of entire show transcripts commented extensively by the comedian himself through a series of very detailed footnotes. These putative texts seem to satisfy Beaugrande & Dressler’s (1981) standards of textuality: they clearly show formal *cohesion* and semantic *coherence*, they are perceived as *intentional* and *accepted* by the reader, who will find these “texts” *informative*, pertinent in terms of *situationality* and rich in terms of *intertextuality*.

However, what is striking in Lee’s footnotes is the frequency of remarks that underline how what is said in the transcript needs to be considered highly context-specific and thus unrepeatable, as shown by the following examples:

- This was off the top of my head, in response to the heckle. (Lee 2010:80)
- The breaking down the room into groups didn’t always happen at this point, and it didn’t always play out exactly like this – this is a transcript of what happened in one occasion. (2010:182)
- All this stuff was different every night. (2010:265)

This *prima facie* highly “scripted” comedian seems always ready to remind the reader that a performance is something that happened in a specific “here and now” and that, as such, is indeed unrepeatable and un-editable:

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11 This definition is the reversal of that proposed, among others, by Oring (1989), for whom “[a] punch line must stand in the final position” (1989:353) of a joke. Again, the reasons for this reversal of the more customary perspective in which *joke* is the primitive notion and *punch line* is the derived one will be discussed in greater detail in section 4.2, particularly at pp. 82-90.

12 A full justification of these statements would require an analysis of these “texts” in their entirety, in the impossibility of which my witness as the reader of them should suffice.
Someone emailed me after the Edinburgh run of 41st Best in the big top\(^{13}\) quoting an exchange in Bristo Square after the show, where a disgruntled punter had come up to me and said, ‘I didn’t enjoy that very much, to be honest’ and apparently I’d said ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you expect me to do about that now’. I don’t remember this. Although I regret wasting people’s time, the work is what it is, and I can’t go back in time and change it now. (2010:253-254)

More than a limitation or an incident, Lee seems to consider this an essential element of stand-up comedy. After transcribing a passage in which the comedian’s gestures during the performance played an important role, Lee notes:

> This doesn’t really work on the page, and ideally, my ambition is to get to the point where none of my stand-up works on the page. I don’t think stand-up comedy should really work on the page, so the very existence of this book is an indication of my ultimate failure as a comedian. (2010:299)

The lesson that can be derived from these remarks is that the “something” that the performance is “performance of”, according to Barber (2003), cannot be found in these transcripts. Clearly, we are not facing the invariant core behind the variation of the performances, which is manifested by it and allows for it. Too many passages of this specific discourse are context-bound and will never be repeated in the same form. In the sense of Barber (2003), which indeed seems to capture what is essential in such a performance-centric medium, the transcript is not text but performance itself, although transcribed, it is the variation itself, not the “something” which the variation is “variation of”. As such, it is clearly not in the transcript that a satisfying solution can be found.

Moving to considering, as a second candidate, the performance recording, the unsuitability of this artefact to constitute the text of stand-up comedy should not require further discussion. Indeed, as a transcription of the performance in a different medium, it is affected by the same arguments that have just been presented, which seem to apply to all transcription regardless of the medium utilised for them.\(^{14}\) Similarly, recordings seem to satisfy Beaugrande & Dressler’s (1981) standards of textuality for the same reasons why these are satisfied by transcripts, with the only difference that the “reader” is replaced by the “viewer” or “listener” as the judge of the

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\(^{13}\) The show 41st Best Stand Up Ever (note added).

\(^{14}\) Apart from the concern about the loss of gestural expressivity expressed by Lee in the last quoted passage, which might be partially addressed by a video recording. This, however, is completely external to the main argument, which is about the fact that any transcript of a specific performance shares with it its being context-specific.
acceptability and of the other reception-based desiderata. The reason why recordings are considered separately here, however, is the privileged attention they have often enjoyed in the literature. In particular, Brodie (2009; 2014) considers all performances prior to the recording as “rough drafts” (2009:73; 2014:19) and stand-up comedy a “teleological” enterprise, the telos of which is the recording, which is the only form in which a performance can enter the canon of stand-up (Ibid.). From the context, it appears clearly that by “recording” Brodie does not refer to the type that many comedians make for themselves in order to analyse and improve their performances, but the professional recording commercialised as a DVD, CD, audio / video download, TV programme or radio programme. The first problem with making this the telos of stand-up comedy is that the great majority of people who perform it live do so without any immediate prospect of accessing this type of professional recording, so they will be missing out on the very telos of what they are doing. Even if the focus is limited to highly successful and commercially viable stand-up comedians, however, we should be able to find some evidence of this telos in their memories and in interviews. What we find, instead, is a constant preoccupation for each live performance, where the desire to “stabilise” these performances is often associated with the desire to “keep them fresh”, as was clear in the last quote from Martin (2007). More than looking at all performances before the recorded one as “the draft” for the latter, stand-up comedians tend to look at each performance as “the draft” for the next one, in a process that looks more open-ended than teleological. The argument about the recording being the way a performance “enters the canon”, moreover, while obviously valid with reference to dead or retired comedians, does not consider the fact that comedians spend a great deal of time watching each other performing live, either by choice or by the logistics of playing in collective comedy “bills”, and by doing so they clearly “learn” from each other.

Moving to the audience’s perspective, it is also clear that, with tours often touching remote areas, they are not deprived of viewing opportunities either to form their own “canonical” references. Even in purely commercial terms, it will seem really far-fetched to consider a live tour that can sell more than a million tickets and earn the performer £20 million pounds as, at least up to the performance of the tour that ends up recorded, a simple draft or rehearsal for something else.

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15 Again, this cannot be fully justified here. Apart from the “personal witness” argument, however, an indirect argument can be derived from the commercial viability of these products: if they were not “acceptable” by viewers/listeners/readers as coherent and cohesive “texts” their existence as products would be difficult to justify.

16 As was the case for Peter Kay’s 2010-2011 record-breaking tour.

17 In July 2017, I asked Ian Brodie to clarify his position on this point during a panel at the 29th Congress of the International Society of Humor Studies in Montreal, Canada. Brodie regretted having used the term “telos” and
If the transcript / recording is too context-specific to be considered as the text behind multiple performances, a third and more promising candidate can probably be found in the script or, more often, the notes that stand-up comedians often use in their preparation for these performances. After all, their very purpose consists in offering a common and relatively stable ground on which the various performances can stand: they are, so to speak, the Ariadne’s thread that helps the comedian to navigate that specific labyrinth. Unfortunately, however, some very serious counter-arguments make this candidate for text not acceptable for the present purposes.

The first problem is that these scripts or notes are private: they are often kept secret and they are not meant for public consumption, as it is made very clear by what happened when the notes of Bob Monkhouse were stolen from his car:

Monkhouse was mystified as to why they had been stolen, saying that the files were ‘of little use to anyone but me’, presumably because the information they contain would have made sense only to him. (Double 2005:238)

Molineux (2016), who dedicates great attention to the analysis of how comedians write and use their notes, also underlines how they represent a form of self-documentation. These notes, then, clearly do not fulfil Beaugrande & Dressler (1981) standards of textuality. There is no formal cohesion in them, to the point that they often consist of distinct pieces of paper or in completely unrelated scribbles on a notepad. For the same reason, they often do not show any semantic coherence. Even more clearly, there is no intentionality behind them (they are not intended to be shared) and, as a consequence, they will not be any accepted as a coherent text by a receiver and they are not informative for anybody but the authors themselves. The discussion might proceed to how their situationality might be incomplete and their intertextuality absent or obscure, but at this stage it does not seem necessary any longer. A similar point is made by Albl-Mikasa (2008) with reference to the notes used in interpreting. In the following passage, Albl-Mikasa lists the differences between what she calls “the notation text” (2008:211) and what she calls “a natural language text” (Ibid.):

clarified that his claim was that in stand-up comedy the recording represents the end point of the lifecycle of some material, making it impossible to be used again, as opposed to what happens in the music business, when recordings make some songs more desirable for live performance.

Although this depends on the point of view: the biographer of a dead comedian, for instance, will probably find great informativity in what would probably not make much sense to a less motivated and competent reader.
Firstly, the notation is characterised by its highly reduced or even fragmentary and incomplete nature and typically contains pictographic and iconic and non-linear structuring principles. Secondly, it is solipsistic in that its purpose is immediate communication between the interpreter and herself. Thirdly, it is an extreme case of intertextuality, as it can be understood by the interpreter almost only in conjunction with the memorised mental representation of the source text. (2008:211)

Albl-Mikasa does not propose her definition of the conditions under which a text can be recognised as such, but it seems that her implicit definition is more generous than Beaugrande & Dressler's (1981): such a putative text lacking cohesion (Albl-Mikasa’s first point) and acceptability / informativity (second point) would clearly not be recognised as a text in the light of the stringent criteria of the latter. This represents, however, just a difference in interpretation, which might even be considered as purely nominalistic. Phenomenologically speaking, instead, Albl-Mikasa’s description of the interpreter’s notes seems to apply also to the notes of stand-up comedy, as will be shown with examples from participants Giada Garofalo (Appendix A.1) and Luca Cupani (Appendix A.3.1).

Even more damaging for the possibility of identifying in notes and/or scripts the text of stand-up comedy is the fact that they might not exist at all, as is shown by this interview with Jay Leno:

[Question:] What was your process of writing material? [Answer:] To this day, I don’t have a joke file. I have nothing written down. I just do the jokes and throw them away.

[Question:] Then how do you keep track of your material? [Answer:] I just keep it in my head. The good jokes I remember, the bad ones I forget. (Ajaye 2002:122-123)

Something that might not even be there at all is clearly not a good candidate for the notion of text in stand-up comedy. Even when they do happen to exist, for the reasons just discussed, scripts and notes do not appear to be instances of text, but just useful tools utilised in its production. This does not mean, of course, that they cannot be of great use in attempting to

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19 With the probable exception of the role played by pictographic elements, although they are not completely absent in the notes of stand-up comedy. For instance, the connections between the topics in Cupani’s notes in Appendix A.3.1 can be described as expressed pictographically. Molineux (2016) reproduces two examples from Mitch Hedberg (2016:5) and Iszi Lawrence (Ibid.) in which pictorial elements are in the foreground. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that a comparison between interpreters’ notes and comedians’ notes would find a more frequent use of pictorial elements in the former than in the latter.

20 This distinction, however, would cease to be so neat if seen in the light of the theory proposed by Carr (2005), according to whom a written text can be a tool for the memorisation and production of an oral text. Otherwise,
locate this apparently so elusive text, but it should never be forgotten that they are maps, so to speak, which as such should never be mistaken for the territory.

The quote just reported, however, has a positive side to it, as well as its more obvious negative side. At the same time of his negating the existence of something “on paper”, Jay Leno in fact assures that there is something “in the head”. This remark has an aura of familiarity with the quote from Barber (2003) reported earlier, in which she mentioned the possibility that the “something” that constitutes the text in oral traditions “can be held to exist in people’s minds or memories” (2003:325). The possibility that a solution to the problem of text in stand-up comedy might be found along these lines, then, starts to take a distinct shape.

In his philosophical study about the ontological status of texts, Gracia (1996) introduces the notion of mental text as a separate entity from the physical text. According to the theory presented in that study, however, a mental text is still dependent on the presence of a written text: it is, indeed, the mental image of a written text (1996:23), which either follows it, for instance in the reader’s mind during the act of reading, or precedes it, for instance in the writer’s mind during the act of writing (1996:24-25). As an instance of the latter process, this is how Nabokov ([1966] 1999) recounts the writing of his first poem:

[…] I carried it homeward, still unwritten, but so complete that even its punctuation marks were impressed on my brain like a pillow crease on a sleeper’s flesh [...]. ([1966] 1999:175)

The mental text, then, does not necessarily appear a posteriori in the mental reproduction of the written text, but can also appear a priori in its production. The notion of mental text, consequently, seems to acquire, in the terminology of Chomsky (1965), the aspect of a form of competence, which underlies and makes possible the performance of the concrete act of writing the text. It would not require a great effort of theoretical imagination to extend this notion to the idea of a mental text that underlies and makes possible a series of oral performances.

This very extension, although apparently in total autonomy from Gracia (1996), has been proposed by the ethnographer Honko (1996) in order to describe the “something” behind the performances of singers of epics along the Silk Roads:

holding both this strong distinction and, for instance, Carr’s interpretation of the origin of the Bible, the Bible would paradoxically cease to be a text. The main point stands, however, that in the case of stand-up comedy not only the written text might not be there, but also that when it there it is only instrumental to the production of the oral text. 21 As also mentioned above, examples can be found in Appendix A.1.1 (with regard to notes) and Appendix A.1.2 (with regard to scripts). Other examples can be found reproduced in Molineux (2016).
To be able to understand the production of text in actual performance, it seems necessary to postulate a kind of “pre-narrative,” a pre-textual frame, that is, an organized collection of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer’s mind. This material consists of (1) textual elements and (2) generic rules for reproduction; we may call it a “mental text.” It is not as fixed as its documented manifestations may suggest, but it is only through its fixed manifestations that we can try to construct components of a particular mental text. (Honko 1996:1)

Before this idea of mental text can be extended to the area of stand-up comedy for the purpose of this study, however, the obvious methodological concerns that such a notion inevitably gives rise to will need to be discussed. A very vivid expression of these concerns can be found in Claus (2000):

Should we take seriously the mental text as a psychological phenomenon? Granting that the performance is produced from within the performer, are we prepared, in fact, to investigate the performer’s brain, memory, mind, or heart? I suspect we are not well enough equipped either technologically or by discipline to investigate these realms. The brain is best left to the neuro-psychologist, production from memory to cognitive psychologists, and the heart to students of religion and morality. (Claus 2000:12)

Of course, researchers examining self-translation of stand-up comedy are not prepared to make all these efforts either. They do, however, enjoy an obvious advantage over people who study singers of oral traditions along the Silk Roads: a much easier access to the performers themselves.

The problem of the inaccessibility of mental contents or states has always been seen, indeed, as the problem of how to access the mental contents or states of other people. Regarding our own mental states, however, help can be found in what Davidson (1984) calls “first person authority”, i.e. “a presumption that we are not mistaken” (1984:101) about them, in other words that we “know our own mind”. Although there is much debate in philosophy of whether this presumption is justified, this justification is not directly relevant for this research: if the mental text is the source text of self-translation, the very possibility of this self-translation will be enough to assure its accessibility to self-translators themselves. At this theoretical stage of the present study this possibility is simply assumed, but it will be corroborated in the course of the empirical stage.
The problem remains, however, of how the researcher on self-translation can share the self-translator’s knowledge. The simple answer is: by doing what people do to share any knowledge, which is by using communication, specifically by asking the putative self-translators whether they are translating and what they are translating. For this reason, the main methodological instrument used in the empirical part of this research will be represented by interviews. After all, as Claus (2000) makes it clear, “the attribution of mental is merely heuristic, meant to embody a hypothesized realm of investigation” (2000:12). It is nothing more than a working hypothesis needed to make sense of the self-translator’s behaviour: in the absence of a written text, in fact, it would be impossible to describe their behaviour as translation without hypothesising something that is translated. This might raise the question of whether there is actually any justification in seeing, in what the bilingual comedian does, a translation activity taking place at all, if making sense of it as such is so hard that it requires the hypothesis of such an elusive sounding entity. This question will be further discussed below. What is important to stress at this stage is that it is this phenomenological observable behaviour, in its double aspect of the production of the manifest text through performance and of the anamnesis about the process leading to it, which constitutes the object of the present study. Defined as such, this object does not pose particularly hard problems of observability, regardless of how hypothetical and un-observable the elements of a theory of it might be.

For the sake of brevity, this (mental) text of stand-up comedy will be, from now on, sometimes referred to with the word comedians themselves use, pre-theoretically so to speak, to refer to it: “material”. As an example of its usage, in an “impro night” a comedian might be reproached for “doing material”, i.e. with delivering a performance of some prepared text rather than the required improvised performance. On the other hand, the very fact that some comedy nights are proposed by their promoters as “new material night”, for instance the Old Rope in London, reveals how, for something to be called “material”, it does not need to have already gone through a cycle of repetitions, otherwise all material would be “old” by definition. What counts, instead, is the intention to make it the text of future performances as well as of the present one.

Thus described, the notion of material as the (mental) text of stand-up comedy clearly satisfies Barber’s (2003) desiderata for the “something” behind the production of performances. It remains to be investigated whether it also satisfies the standards of textuality proposed by Beaugrande & Dressler (1981). Among these standards, cohesion and coherence are particularly important since, as mentioned previously, they are the only ones that apply to the text itself, as opposed to the attitude towards it. It will be argued that investigating these standards with
regard to stand-up comedy material reveals how this notion should not be considered as “simple”, but a distinction between three different sub-types of it is, instead, required.

Traditionally, research on humorous texts has focused on jokes. More recently, Attardo (2001) has turned his attention to “longer texts”, arguing that stand-up comedy “routines” (as he calls them) must be considered as belonging to this category. By using Rutter’s (1997) analysis of opening, closings and audience-performer transitions as evidence of how “while it is tempting to see stand-up comedy as a zero degree of connectiveness of jokes, this view would be simplistic in the extreme” (2010: 62), Attardo concludes that “far from being improvised, a stand-up routine is a highly rehearsed, planned text” (Ibid.). This recognition of the “connectiveness”, in other words, represents an important starting point, but it is also important to identify the different elements connected. The suggestion that will be proposed is that the failure to do is often due to the fact that “joke text”, “routine” and “set” are used there as synonyms and/or are not distinguished as concepts. In fact, the word “set” is actually never used in Attardo (2001), so what is meant here is that there is no distinction between that notion and the notion of “routine”, which instead is used to describe both.

Using the brief taxonomy of the structural elements of stand-up comedy previously outlined, a classification of three types of comedians will be proposed, each of them characterised by the type of performances they tend to produce. It will then be argued that texts of different types need to be assumed as the underlying invariant for these performances.

A first type of comedian is represented by the so-called “one-liner comedians” or “gag merchants”, who deliver performances based on very sharp jokes, which are unrelated or very loosely related to each other. Well known examples are Jimmy Carr, Tim Vine, Milton Jones and Steven Wright. The application of the coherence and cohesion standards from Beaugrande & Dressler (1981) suggests that, with reference to this type of comedian, the text behind their performances is constituted by the single joke. In fact, there is often no linguistic transition between these jokes (no cohesion) and they are often completely unrelated in terms of their meaning (no coherence). The joke itself seems to be, in these performances, the most complex element to satisfy these requirements.

22 It is possible that more types will be “discovered” during the empirical part of this research.
23 These “types of comedians” can be seen as a shortcut for “types of performances”. Being the type of performance they tend to deliver the only criterion for distinguishing between these types of comedians, the two concepts can be considered equivalent, so the choice to focus on the comedian types is just for simplicity of exposition.
Moving to the bilingual perspective, from this suggestion can be derived the prediction that, as self-translators, comedians of this type will proceed with translating their collection of material joke by joke, for instance by deciding whether to include in in the target text or to exclude it as “untranslatable”. On the other hand, the sequence in which these jokes are delivered will probably be allowed to vary greatly from the sequence in the source language, which itself is normally highly variable anyway.

A second type of comedians is represented by those who tend to deliver performances built around routines, in which different jokes are linked together by a common theme or attitude. The routines themselves, however, are glued to each other with the usage of very loose, often clichéd and sometimes, frankly, perfunctory links. Notable examples are Jerry Seinfeld, Louis C.K. and Doug Stanhope in the US and Eddie Izzard, Michael McIntyre and Stewart Lee in the UK. The application of the coherence and cohesion standards suggests, in this case, that the routine itself will constitute the text for this type of comedian, since it represents the biggest element in its performances that seem to satisfy these standards.

Moving again to the bilingual perspective, the resulting prediction is that these routine texts will also constitute the main object of the activity of self-translation from the comedians: it will be these routine texts, for instance, that will constitute the main unit of continuous text in the decision of what to translate and what not.

The third type of comedians are those who tend to deliver performances in which the entire show is linked together from the beginning to the end by a common narrative arch and/or by a common argumentative structure. Notable examples include Dave Gorman, Alex Horne, Mark Thomas and Tim FitzHigham. In this case, it is the entire show-length set that satisfies the cohesion and coherence standards and will therefore manifest the underlying cohesive and coherent set text. Again, the prediction is that it will be these set texts that will constitute the main object of the self-translator’s intentions. Given that these categories of comedians, however, are not equally represented in the sample chosen for this study, the confirmation of these predictions is left to future research.

From all this we can now derive that the remaining “attitudinal” standards are also satisfied by the texts belonging to these types. When the receiver is involved, however, we will obviously

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24 As all taxonomies, this is a sort of idealisation and should allow for grey areas and border-crossings. I, for one, did my first two Edinburgh Fringe solo shows as a routine-based comedian but I switched to thematic comedy for my latest two. Moreover, even the most thematic show will probably allow (typically in the middle section) for some unrelated jokes or routines.
need to refer to the manifest text contained in the performance, not the underlying mental text. This seems compatible with the model proposed by Beaugrande & Dressler (1981), given that the standard of situationality, for instance, is defined by them in terms of the relevance to the situation of a specific occurrence of a text (1981:163). Leaving aside for a moment the fact that the distinction mental text / manifest text (in performance) accounts, in addition, for a certain level of variation, this distinction can be mapped onto the text / occurrence distinction found in Beaugrande & Dressler (1981). In light of the above, the joke / routine / set (which one, depends on the type of comedian according to the classification just proposed) text appears to be:

- intended by the comedian as something cohesive and coherent: it appears quite intuitive that this is the case, but if confirmation is needed it might be provided by asking the comedians themselves, since intentions are clearly within the realm of “first person authority”;

- accepted by the audience as something cohesive and coherent: this is made evident by the fact that (most of) the audience sit attentively through the entire duration of it, instead of just “picking and choosing” parts of it;

- perceived as informative by the audience: the joke / routine / set contains in fact something unexpected for the receiver, which is probably one of the main reasons why they will (hopefully) find something pleasurable in it; 25

- perceived by the audience as relevant to the situation.

The last requirement is granted by the process of contextualisation, briefly described above, in which elements of discourse are related to the “here and now” of the performance, regardless of their actual origin.

2.4 The implications of self-translation

In the previous sections, the subject of oral self-translation of stand-up comedy was investigated by means of a discussion on the nature of orality and an investigation of what, in the translation of an oral form, can be identified as the source text and target text of the translation activity. It is now time to focus the subject of self-translation in general, in order to locate this subject within the debate about it and to explore its possible implications. The problem of self-translation, in fact, once considered marginal and neglected by researchers, as was still lamented by Hokenson & Munson (2007:2), has been more recently the object of much greater

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25 This includes the case in which it is the over-familiar that is represented. As was noted, among others, by Koziski (1984), in these cases the humorous effect consists in showing the over-familiar in a new light.
Despite all this, the monograph by Brian T. Fitch (1988) still remains the most systematic and theoretically ambitious monograph on the subject. The already-mentioned Hokenson & Munson (2007) is another very important and influential text, but its focus is more historical than theoretical, despite its subtitle History and Theory of Literary Self-translation suggesting a perfect balance between these two viewpoints. A more theoretical approach is offered, in French, by Oustinoff (2001). Jung (2002), moreover, offers a very detailed taxonomy of the different types of self-translation and his work constitutes a rare-example of a study that focuses on non-literary translation. A detailed review of the literature on the subject can be found in Van Bolderen (2010), a study that focuses on mapping what was covered and what was not in the research on self-translation at the time. One of its conclusions is that current studies have almost exclusively focused on textual translation, while ignoring, for instance, “self-translation as evolution or transportation of the self” (2010:34). The invitation to widen the horizon beyond the written text is highly commendable. This research will try to offer a contribution towards that goal.

In the case of Fitch (1988), the path of his investigation, moreover, raises some very important points for the purposes of this research and, consequently, will be retraced in its main lines of development. When the occasion arises, other (and more recent) voices in this debate will also be taken into consideration. The focus of this section, however, will be on the general problem of self-translation and on its implications for the case of stand-up comedy. More specific issues, such as questions of identity and autobiography, will be deferred to other stages of the present research.

Flitch’s work moves from the viewpoint of literary criticism on Samuel Beckett. Beckett, in fact, wrote most of his works both in English and French, often switching during his life between using one or the other language for his first versions. Most critics, Fitch observes, focus on Beckett’s works in one language, ignoring those written in the other. This marks a stark contrast from other types of translation: any literary critic focusing only on the translated (by somebody else) texts of the writer at the centre of his attention would be considered highly unprofessional. Fitch argues, however, that this concealment of one version of the text is not acceptable, since many and significant differences can be identified between the two texts, for

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26 At the time of writing, the latest edition (XXVIII, 1 April 2017, edited by Eva Gentes) of an online bibliography on self-translation is 152 pages long (and can be found at the following address: https://app.box.com/s/vbkastc60es105n5g8djakvd4alfths4). Contrary to what was noticed by Van Bolderen (2010) only four years earlier, many of these contributions seem to come from the area of Translation Studies, not from bordering areas such as literary criticism. This impression, however, might only be confirmed by repeating that study’s very detailed quantitative analysis.
instance between *L’innommable* and *The Unnamable* (1988:49-62), including additions, omissions and changes in the sequence of the sense-units.

Moving to considering the production of the texts, Fitch observes how Beckett, when translating for instance the French text of *Bing* into the English text of *Ping*, ignored the latest version of the French text, using instead an earlier version of it. He describes these findings as follows:

> The activity we have been able to discern at work through our analysis of the manuscripts is essentially the reorganisation, reformulation and restructuring of this primary matter, already textual in nature, and in the case of material, quantifiable discrepancies of meaning, of bits and pieces of text. In this, the freedom the writer exercises – were he not also the author of the original text, would we not have said that he had ‘taken liberties’ with the letter? – however relative it may be, is real enough. [...] There is no doubt that the most significant conclusion to be drawn from the study of the genesis of this short prose text is that no person other than Beckett, no ‘mere translator’, could have produced the text of *Ping*. (1988:77-78)

This freedom to introduce variations and carry them across bi-directionally across languages is enjoyed and explicitly recognised by another famous self-translator, Vladimir Nabokov ([1966] 1999):

> For the present, final edition of *Speak, memory* I have not only introduced basic changes and copious additions into the initial English text, but have availed myself of the corrections I made while turning it into Russian. This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what has been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before. ([1966] 1999:6)

In the more recent academic literature, this freedom of the self-translator has become the *cause célèbre* of the entire debate. Eco (2013), for instance, “confessed” to an almost complete rewriting of *A Theory of Semiotics*, originally published in English, when he self-translated it into the Italian *Trattato di Semiotica Generale*. Conversely, he sees a better example of the author sharing the deontological limitations of the translator in the case of the former collaborating with the latter, concluding: “meglio sempre autotradursi in compagnia di qualcuno” [always better to translate yourself in the company of somebody else] (Eco 2013:29, my translation). 27

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27 Jung (2002) also talks about an “aided” self-translation (2002:24) and seems to agree that the resulting text “may be closer to the self-translator’s intention than an unaided version” (2002:24-25).
In another presentation from the same conference, Laura Salmon (2013) uses the freedom of the self-translator as an argument to reject the very possibility of self-translation. Salmon compares the self-translator to the doctor who tries to cure himself, reminding the reader of how this double role is notoriously dangerous (2013:91). She summarises her conclusions as follows:

In conclusione, l'autotraduzione richiede una vera impossibilità: si dovrebbe esser disposti a conservare – danneggiandosi e potendo evitare di farlo – ciò che spiace nel proprio testo e che oggi sembra estraneo; d’altro canto, un ipotetico autore a cui non spiaccia nulla di ciò che ha scritto non pare disporre dell’umiltà su cui si fonda l’etica della traduzione.

[In conclusion, self-translation requires a true impossibility: on one hand, it would require an availability to maintain – even to one’s own detriment and with the possibility of avoid doing that – what in one’s own text is disliked and that now looks extraneous; on the other hand, a hypothetical author who dislikes everything he has written doesn’t seem to partake of the humility on which the ethics of translation is founded.] (2013:96, my translation)

The authorial freedom enjoyed by the self-translators, in other words, is seen as a “sin” that prevents them from attaining the same respectability as the proper, allographic translators. Conversely, Anselmi (2012) has defended self-translation by denying this difference in the level of freedom enjoyed. She argues that considering self-translation as an activity that affords greater freedom than allographic translation means forgetting what she calls “the creative turn” (2002:22) in Translation Studies, i.e. the acknowledgment that translation in general is a creative activity. Anselmi admits, however, that self-translators feel freer when self-translating then when translating other authors, but she attributes this perceived freedom to change the text to “the requirements imposed by the new writing context” (2002:51). This line of argument, however, is not convincing. The need to adapt to a new context, in fact, is also felt in allographic translation, so it cannot offer an explanation for the perception of greater freedom enjoyed by the self-translators. Moreover, recognising that translation is always a creative activity, and that there is always a degree of freedom involved, does not preclude self-translators from enjoying an even greater degree of freedom. The freedom of not translating entire chapters of a book, for instance, or of radically changing the sequence of the chapters, is a freedom that very few allographic translators would probably feel authorised to enjoy. Similarly, when commenting on

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28 A similar position is argued by Whyte (2002), who states that “the person least qualified to translate any poem is the person who wrote it” (2002:68).
a particularly creative solution chosen by Joyce when translating himself, Eco (2003) notes: “Qualsiasi traduttore che non fosse stato Joyce stesso sarebbe stato accusato di insostenibile licenza” [Every other translator but Joyce himself would have been accused of taking an unjustifiable liberty] (2003:307, my translation). Of course, measuring degrees of freedom is not an easy task, so the best advisable approach to this problem would probably be the phenomenological one. In other words, the difference in the subjective experience of freedom enjoyed during self-translation on one side and allographic translation of the other should be trusted as phenomenological evidence, instead of being “explained away”.

Fitch (1988), in contrast, offers a way to justify this very phenomenological evidence for greater freedom, by showing that self-translation offers the author a chance of resuming the course of this textual productivity, along lines that are not far from the ideas on translation, writing and publishing suggested by Jorge Luis Borges in his essays and speculative fiction. The relevance of J. L. Borges’s vision of text production and translation for this debate, indeed, has already been noted by Bassnett (2013) and here will be explored further with specific reference to self-translation. In his article about the “versions” of Homer, Borges ([1932] 2001) writes:

> Are not the many versions of Iliad – from Chapman to Magnien – merely different perspectives on a mutable fact, a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphases? (There is no essential necessity to change languages; this intentional game of attention is possible within a single literature.) To assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft nine is inferior to draft H – for there can only be draft. The concept of the “definite text” corresponds only to religion or exhaustion. ([1932] 2001:69)

The implications of this view of the text as “only draft” can be better understood by contrasting them with Borges’ own reductio ad absurdum of the idea of the “definite text”: his short story *Pierre Menard Author of the Quixote*. Indeed, in this story the fictional Pierre Menard writes in his diary, while describing his task of rewriting Cervantes’ Don Quixote word-by-word:

> My obliging predecessor did not refuse the collaboration of chance: he composed his immortal work somewhat à la diable, carried along by the inertias of language and invention. (Borges [1939] 1992:92)

This freedom is granted to the author but negated to Pierre Menard to an absolute degree and to the translator to a lesser, but still significant degree. In this discussion on self-translation, Borges’s thought experiment can be extended to the case of Pierre Menard translating his own
Don Quixote into another language. The same situation observed by Fitch with regard to Beckett would, at that point, be replicated in this hypothetical and fictional case. The narrator of Borges’s story, a friend of Menard, in fact, observes:

> I have reflected that it is permissible to see in this “final” Quixote a kind of palimpsest, through which the traces – tenuous but not indecipherable – of our friend’s “previous” writing should be translucently visible. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, inverting the other’s work, would be able to exhume and revive those lost Troys... (Borges [1939] 1992:95)

The access to those “traces” (at least in their mnemonic form) would also be granted, though, to Pierre Menard himself self-translating his Don Quixote into another language. He could, just as Fitch showed in the case of Beckett, use a previous version of his text as the basis for the resulting text in the target language. In other words, he would gain back some of the freedom he rightly attributed to, and probably envied in, his predecessor Cervantes. The inevitable result of this newly gained freedom is that a translation by Pierre Menard himself of his Don Quixote would not necessarily result in an acceptable translation of Cervantes’ Don Quixote. This conclusion represents a hypothetical paradoxical development of an already paradoxical and fictional starting point, but as what philosophers call a thought experiment, it might contribute to underline the differences between translation and self-translation. This will soon be shown as especially pertinent to the case of oral self-translation of stand-up comedy.

Another text by Borges mentioned by Steiner (1998) as relevant to the problem of translation is Borges and I. This text works even better as a metaphor for the psychological or, even, existential condition of the self-translator. Writing about his relationship with the “Borges” constructed as the author of his texts, Borges writes:

> Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him. (Borges [1960] 1992:324)

This is an apt comment on the condition of the self-translator: the need to confirm and certify one’s identity as an author by producing the “same” text in another language is constantly counter-balanced by the temptation of freedom, by the desire for a “flight from one’s self”. As it happens with Borges trying to escape from “Borges”, this attempt is constantly frustrated, since
every attempted flight from identity is soon incorporated into the new identity, every betrayal of the text by its own author becomes part of the new text, albeit, in the self-translator’s case, a bilingual one.

Proceeding further with this move of focus from the author back to the text, the following extract from an interview with Borges, the starting point of which seems to be his article about the translation of Homer quoted above, is also of great interest:

[Interviewer:] You have said that translations are different perspectives of an object in motion.

[Borges:] Yes, I suppose they are. But every translation is a new version. And every book is really a rough draft. As [Alfonso] Reyes said to me, we publish our books in order not to spend our lifetimes going over rough drafts. (Borges & Burgin 1988:201)

Borges then adds that this is a good thing, since it gives the author the freedom to work on something else. But it might also be argued that the quote depicts the (published) written work as a case, so to speak, of arrested development. This suspicion is as ancient as Plato’s Phaedrus, in which Socrates laments about written words: “you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing” 29 (Plato, Phaedrus: 275d-e). The self-translator, on the other hand, is given another opportunity to make the text say something different, to re-start and revitalise the text as a process. 30 In this sense, it can be said that self-translation allows the written text to partially close the gap with the greater degree of open-endedness enjoyed by oral discourse. Naturally, this interpretation has some interesting consequences for the case of self-translation of stand-up comedy, which are investigated below in section 5.8 (pp. 126-129).

Resuming the exposition of Fitch’s argumentation in the light of this excursus about Borges, it is now time to introduce his radical suggestion that, for instance in the case of Beckett’s Bing / Ping, there is no original, but only variants (1988:132). He explains further:

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29 One might retort that from the reception point of view there is a continuous activity of constant re-interpretations, as it has been recognised by many, for instance Steiner (1998). This recognition, however, should not hide the fact that from the production point of view the process has indeed stopped at the moment of publication, with the obvious exception of successive editions.

30 A similar interpretation of translation as revitalisation of the text, although in general and not limited to self-translation, is attributed to Goethe by Steiner (1998:273).
What is appropriate is to attribute equal status to both versions, neither confusing the chronological precedence of the first version with authoritative precedence nor confusing the status of the last version of a series of versions which characterises the second version with that of the final, definitive, and hence authoritative text. The fact of the matter is that both Bing and Ping are alternative outcomes of the same textual productivity. Both pairs of texts have emerged from the same body of textual material [...] and constitute different ways in which that textual matter was able to work itself out, just as a piece of clay can assume different shapes in the hand of the sculptor. (1988:133)

Fitch goes one step further, claiming that the two texts are themselves variants:

In a private letter to one of his critics, Brian Finney, Beckett said of the short texts that were published in English under the title Residua and that included Ping that they were ‘residual... even when that does not appear of which each is all that remains’. Likewise, Bing and Ping are variants even though ‘that does not appear of which each is’ a variant. They are then variants of something that enjoys no tangible textual existence but whose existence is none the less implicit in their co-existence. (1988:134-135)

This elusive “something” discussed by Fitch displays a striking familiarity with the “something” by means of which Barber (2003) expressed the need to locate an invariant core behind the variants of oral performances. As in that case, we are faced with the problem of the intangibility of this core, paradoxically associated with the evident manifestation of it by means of its tangible variants.

Moving back to the case of stand-up comedy, the same high degree of freedom of variation that is allowed to self-translators of written texts also seems to be allowed the performers of live comedy (which in the latter case can even be noted in the monolingual perspective). Self-translation allows the written text to resume its life as a process, allowing its intangible core of meaning to manifest itself in its multiple incarnations in different languages. Similarly, this process of variation and consolidation is, as was shown above, the norm in the oral flux of stand-up comedy performances. Whereas self-translation appears almost like a “scandal”, or at least a paradox, in the otherwise relatively stable world of the written text, disrupting it with its injection of oral-like fluidity, it seems to find a less problematic habitat in the already fluid world of orality. A self-translated written text is, in a sense, a written text temporarily made oral (it is made fluid again and allowed to change), while an oral text is, in a sense, a constantly self-translated text (it keeps changing itself), even in the monolingual perspective.
There is, in fact, a wider sense of *translation*, and hence of self-translation, according to which some sort of translation is actually *already* taking place even in the monolingual case of stand-up comedy. Steiner (1998:28-29) states that “reader, actor, editor are translators of language out of time” and that “the same model is operating within a single language” (Ibid.). In this sense, *translation* is the activity of “carrying over” meaning across time. As re-enactors of their material from one performance to the next, stand-up comedians clearly embody this concept of *translators out of time*. More precisely, given that they usually perform this function on something of which they are the sole authors and for which they are granted total freedom of variation, they represent a case of *self*-translators out of time.

Adding a new language, then, will just mean adding a new dimension on which these variations are played out. What will probably be observed\(^3\) is that, at one point in some material’s performance history, a specific performance will represent a bigger “jump” from any previous performance of that particular material: it will be the first self-translation in the stricter sense, the first time that a performance in one language is translated into a performance in a different language. It is important to remember the completely different *scale* of this change from any other change in the performance history of that specific material, otherwise the useful metaphor offered by Steiner of “performance as translation” would carry too much weight and the very possibility of talking about self-translation in the stricter sense would be lost.

After this “jump”, however, the (from now on bilingual) continuum of *self-translations out of time*, in other words of performances, will resume, with variations, acts of proper new writing (although “in the mind”) and acts of (now partial) self-translation in the stricter sense appearing potentially anywhere in its course, without any easily recognisable source-target distinction or any predictable directionality between languages. Borrowing a metaphor from the concept of a *time-space continuum* in physics, stand-up comedy performances will unfold in a *time-language(s) continuum* of variations and repetitions.

In conclusion to this section, this vision of self-translation in stand-up comedy will offer a theoretical dynamic model that will both guide and be corroborated by the remaining course of the present research.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) This, again, will be verified empirically.

\(^4\) In section 4.3, particularly at pp. 96-98, a further dynamic model is proposed, which will aim to capture the trial-and-error nature of oral self-translation *vis-à-vis* a real and/or a hypothetical audience.
2.5 Definitions of the theoretical terms used in this study

The present section offers the definition of terms which are either theoretically constructed within this study or which, while being terms in common usage, assume a specific meaning within this study. The terms “stand-up comedy”, “languages” and “performing” are intended as undefined primitives.

Bilingual stand-up comedy

The activity of performing stand-up comedy, and the performances resulting as products of this activity, in more than one language (across different performances, although the single performance is usually monolingual)

Translation (for bilingual stand-up comedy)

In order to define translation for the term to be applied to the investigation of bilingual comedy, the most important question to be addressed (in the absence of artefacts explicitly presented as “translations”, such as translated books or DVDs) is that of how the researcher will be able to recognise its occurrences. In other words, the term will be defined by means of the proposal of a criterion to identify these occurrences: whatever satisfies this criterion, will then be considered as an instance of translation for stand-up comedy. For this purpose, some general definitions of translation will be discussed for their possible applicability. Pym (2007), for one, distinguishes between three main attempts to offer a definition of translation: translation as equivalence, Ernst-August Gutt’s interpretative resemblance and Gideon Toury’s postulates of assumed translation. We will evaluate them in turn for their applicability to oral self-translation.

An updated, sophisticated and humour-specific version of equivalence theory is offered by Attardo’s (2002). His theory is the application to translation of the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), which in turn was proposed by Attardo himself and Victor Raskin (Attardo & Raskin 1991). Although not explicitly presented as an equivalence theory, the very first sentence of Attardo’s paper clearly locates his theory in the equivalence field: “That translation involves preservation of meaning across languages is so obvious that it literally goes without saying” (Attardo 2002:173). When the task at hand is that of evaluating the validity of a given translation of some specific humorous content, GTVH can result very useful. In short, it consists of identifying a set of parameters (called “knowledge resources”) in which the content of a joke can be analysed. The similarity metric of the values assumed by these parameters between a joke in the source language and in its translation in the target language is, then, proposed as the
measure of the validity for that specific translation. Where the theory does not offer much help, however, is in deciding whether a translation occurred or not. If, for instance, a joke and its alleged translation show a very low similarity metric between them, the theory does not offer any indication as to whether these two jokes were developed independently or were the result of a translation attempt that widely missed the similarity mark. The same limitation can be generalised to other equivalence-based approaches to translation.

Moving to Gutt’s definition of translation as *interpretative resemblance*, it needs to be noted, for a start, that Gutt (1990) takes his cue from the distinction between overt and covert translation, although the latter is called “incidental translation” (1990:143). The example offered is that of the translation of a technical manual for a photocopier, for which “the existence of a source language text in such situations is incidental rather than necessary for the interlingual communication act to succeed” (1990:143). The author then adds that “seeing that in such cases of interlingual communication the source language stimulus plays an auxiliary rather than a central role, one wonders how appropriate it is to refer to them as ‘translation’ at all” (1990:143). Coherently with this narrowing of focus, Gutt (1990) then proposes a theory of translation, based on the notions of the “interpretative use” of language (in which a sentence is produced in order to offer an interpretation of another sentence) that is offered as applicable to overt translation only. This explicit limitation to the theory’s scope clearly excludes its applicability, and the applicability of the definition of translation it entails, to the current purposes. Oral self-translation of stand-up, in fact, is a case of covert translation, given that it is usually not proposed as translation to the audience and not recognised as such by the audience.33

This limit seems, at first, also to exclude the possibility of applying the third definition candidate listed by Pym (2007) in his article, i.e. the definition consisting in Gideon Toury’s *postulates of translation*. The role of these postulates, in fact, is to describe the implicit assumptions under which a translation is, indeed, *assumed* as such. On closer inspection, however, these postulates seem to point to something that can be useful for the present purposes. They can be summarised as follows34:

33 That this is the case is confirmed by both my experience as an audience member of stand-up and my personal experience as a translating comedian. I do not remember ever watching a stand-up comedy show that was explicitly proposed as a translation to its audience.
34 Although not representing a quote, since it was preferred to reference Toury directly and not from another quote, this brief summary follows closely the one offered by Pym (2007).
1. The source text postulate, which holds that “there is another text, in another culture/language, which has both chronological and logical priority over [the translation] and is presumed to have served as the departure point and basis for it” (Toury 1995:33-34).

2. The transfer postulate: “the process whereby the assumed translation came into being involved the transference from the assumed source text of certain features that the two now share” (Toury 1995:34).

3. The relationship postulate: “there are accountable relationships which tie [the assumed translation] to its assumed original” (Toury 1995:35).

With regard to the first postulate, we can say that it still holds for orally self-translated comedy, provided that, as was argued in section 2.3, at pp. 31-36, the concept of text is extended to include the notion of mental text. As, again, was argued in section 2.3 (particularly at pp. 32-33), this conceptual extension does not require a commitment to any “mentalistic” standpoint, nor a commitment to any ontology of mental texts. What it means, in concrete terms, is that there is a series of performances in the source language that has chronological and logical priority over a series of performances in the target language. The notion of mental text describes what the performances within each series have in common with each other and what, by guiding the production of the performances themselves, can be assumed in order to explain that familiarity between them.

Regarding, instead, the second and third postulate, Pym (2007) asks what in this case seems to represent a key question, commenting that these postulates “must be complemented by some consideration of exactly who is supposed to be doing all the assuming” (2007:157). The possibility of answering this question for the case at hand is essential in order to evaluate this definition’s applicability to the case of orally self-translated comedy; it seems that any assumption from the audience of the performances should be excluded. This, in fact, would be in contradiction with the realisation, discussed above, that this type of translation is, from the point of view of the recipient, a form of covert translation.

A second candidate might, instead, be identified in the researcher trying to reconstruct the translation process, but this choice would lead to define this type of translation as a “Schrodinger’s translation”, so to speak, which would appear as such only at the moment of becoming an object of investigation. Moreover, what is needed here is a definition that can be used by the researchers themselves to decide whether an instance of verbal comedy represents
translation or not, so no assumption can be attributed to them with regard to the very matter that needs to be decided.

Finally, a further candidate for the role of “who does the assuming” might be the alleged translators themselves. In other words, the way to decide whether a translation is taking place would be to ask the alleged translators whether or not they “experience” what they do as a translation activity. This choice would be consistent with the more general phenomenological approach, which, as described in the next chapter, represents an important aspect of the methodology chosen for this study. Under this interpretation, Toury’s postulates can be reformulated into a definition of translation that can now be applied to the current case of bilingual comedy. Specifically, a performance of stand-up comedy in a given language constitutes a translation if:

1. There is something which guided the production of performances in another language, which has both chronological and logical priority over the translation and is presumed by the alleged translator to have served as the departure point and basis for it.
2. the alleged translator can reconstruct a process whereby the assumed translation came into being and that involved the transference from the mental text in the other language of certain features that the two now share.

The absence of an adaptation of the accountability postulate might have been noticed. The reason is that, in the absence of written texts, the only possible accountability would be represented by a verbal account provided by the translators themselves, which would result in a duplication of the second postulate, i.e. the adaptation of the transfer postulate. Objective proofs of translation, such as written notes or recording, in fact, might be available in some cases, but their availability cannot be assumed in a general definition. In conclusion to this section, a version of the definition of translation as assumed translation in which the assumption is made by the alleged translators themselves will be used in the course of the present discussion.

(Source/target) text (for translation of bilingual comedy)

When translation is recognised as taking place in bilingual stand-up comedy, according to the definition just proposed, the source text of this transfer can be defined as the “something” mentioned in the first postulate mentioned above as constitutive of this definition of translation. The target text is the result of this process of transfer. While it can only be observed in performance, it should not be conflated with the target performance(s), which will include
elements that are either extemporary or are not the result of the transfer. The target text of translation of stand-up comedy can then be considered as constituted by whatever a) enables a series of performances in the target language, in particular by allowing those performances to display a relatively invariant content and b) is the result of an interlingual transfer. By abstracting over the source/target distinction, we can then derive the more general notion of the text of stand-up comedy: what is relatively invariable across a series of related performances, and/or what enables this invariability, and which can represent, or not, the source and target of a bilingual transfer. The text of, say, Comedian A’s Edinburgh Fringe 2017 in Language Alpha show will then be constituted by all that enables/can be read in the invariant core across all the performances of this show. If seen from the bilingual perspective, part of this text can be described as having played the role of target text in the bilingual transfer by Comedian A from a series of performances originally developed in Language Beta. Moreover, part of this text might have been developed originally in Language Alpha, but might have become the source text of a transfer to language Beta. Conversely, it might also be the case that other parts of this text could neither be described as source or target text, since it they were never involved in any interlinguistic transfer. Finally, while the text is manifested in performance, other parts of the performance cannot be seen as manifestation of the text, since they are only produced “in the moment”, for instance in response to a specific audience interaction. A fortiori, not being part of the text, these elements of performance cannot play the role of source text or target text in language transfer.

Mental text (of stand-up comedy)

The mental text of stand-up comedy is the text of stand-up comedy defined before, but with the added connotation of its being stored in the mind. As mentioned above, the term text (of stand-up comedy) is used in this study both to refer to both something which can be recognised in performance (its patterns of relative repeatability across a series of related performances) and to something that enables the production of the latter. The term mental text is preferred in this study whenever the need to underline this second perspective presents itself.

Self-translation

A form of translation in which the author of the source text and the translator are the same person. This study claims that that the form of translation performed by bilingual stand-up comedians represents a form of self-translation.
**Oral self-translation**

A form of self-translation in which neither the source text or the target text is constituted by a written text nor by a recorded text. In this study, the term is then used as a synonym of oral-to-oral-self-translation. The notion of mental text defined above can also be seen as the theoretical construct need to provide the source and target of oral self-translation, of which translation of stand-up comedy is proposed as a specific case (other cases of oral self-translation might occur, for instance, in the translation of lectures or political speeches, whenever they are not just the oral production of a written text). This study claims that that the form of translation performed by bilingual stand-up comedians represents a form of oral self-translation.

**Comedian**

In this study, comedian is perceived as whoever performs comedy, either professionally or not. More specifically, bilingual comedian is whoever performs comedy in two or more languages, usually across different performances and contexts.

**Utterances, propositions, sentences**

The verbal content of a specific performance of stand-up comedy is constituted by utterances. When a pattern of repetition can be recognised within a series of related performances, the mental text of stand-up comedy can be described as containing propositions and/or sentences (a definition of these terms and a discussion of the difference between them is offered in section 4.2 at pp. 82-83), which enable the repeatable production of the aforementioned utterances.

**2.6 Conclusions**

In conclusion to this chapter in general, the search for what type of translation is putatively involved in stand-up comedy has raised the question of what would, in this type of search, play the role of source text and target text. In turn, this has raised the question of what constitutes, in general, the text of stand-up comedy. It was argued that this function cannot be attributed to written texts such as notes, script or transcripts, which offers a theoretical argument in favour of the initial hypothesis that stand-up comedy represents an oral form of communication. Conversely, this recognition confirmed oral self-translation as the type of translation putatively involved in bilingual stand-up comedy. The argument, then, can be developed in either direction: on the one hand, the oral nature of stand-up comedy, if accepted as the initial
hypothesis, can lead to the proposal of the notion of oral self-translation as the type of translation putatively occurring in stand-up comedy; on the other, the need to understand the nature of the text involved in this type of translation offers the possibility of developing a better understanding of the oral nature of stand-up comedy itself. The notion of mental text was proposed as a theoretical tool that can be useful in developing that understanding.

All these conceptual clarifications were needed to prepare the ground for the empirical part of this study. Before the latter is discussed, however, it is necessary to investigate how these theoretical notions can both guide and be grounded on this empirical research and how the latter needs to be conducted to make this possible. This is the aim of the next chapter.
3 Methodology

The discussion of the notion of mental text in the previous chapter has briefly touched on methodological considerations. In this chapter, the question of the most appropriate methods to investigate a phenomenon for which no tangible artefacts seem to be available (if not as preparatory material) will be investigated in greater detail. First, it will be argued that it is the experience of the translators themselves that needs to be interrogated, since this would allow a response to some methodological difficulties. For instance, like other forms of self-translation, the direction of the translation is often difficult to detect. Moreover, the timing of this translation activity can also be problematic to reconstruct. Even deciding whether a translation is taking place at all requires, according to the definition proposed in the previous chapter, the investigation of the supposed self-translator’s assumptions. Finally, the different languages involved in this self-translation might be associated with different emotional connotations, which can be investigated only by exploring how the comedians felt.

3.1 The need for an “internal” approach and the choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In order to justify the need to investigate the translator’s subjective experience, it can be useful to discuss the possible alternative view, according to which the verbal behaviour involved in this type of translation is as observable as for any other type of translation, since it can be recorded, stored and analysed at the researcher’s best convenience. If this were the case, oral self-translation of stand-up would not present any specific problem and could be investigated, for instance, by means of an external approach such as descriptive translation study (DTS), described by Toury (1995).

However, when evaluating this possibility, it is important to remember that confronting any two performances from the same comedian in the two languages would not be enough for an investigation of whether and how translation has taken place. What needs to be performed, instead, is a comparison between two pertinent performances from the same comedian, which in turn means two performances of the same “something”. In the context of stand-up comedy, this means that that we need to compare two performances of the same material, i.e. of the same joke, routine or set. Identifying this material is not easy and the solution proposed by DTS does not seem to be available. As discussed in section 2.5 at p.46, performances in the target
language are not presented and recognised as the result of translation in the target culture. Indeed, Toury (1995:75) himself recognises as particularly difficult for his approach the case of a translation by somebody else of a work from authors who, in turn, are also themselves self-translators, such as Samuel Beckett. The reason is that in that case even the identification of the source language, let alone of the source text, might become problematic (in the case of Beckett: should a German translator start from the English or the French text of *Bing / Ping*?). In the case of bilingual comedians, this results in the impossibility of discovering (from the outside) whether the comedians are translating some piece of material from one language into another, or are editing and developing it within the same language or are actually doing both things, i.e. both translating something and further developing it.

On the other hand, not much help can be offered by another external approach, the one based on the notion of equivalence, for the reasons of circularity pointed out, among others, by Pym (1992:37). Using the equivalence between two pieces of material in two different languages to demonstrate that a translation relationship between them took place, even ignoring for a moment the intrinsically problematic nature of the notion of equivalence itself (Pym 2014:17-18; 20-21), would in fact imply a reversal of the terms of the investigation. Equivalence (or the lack of it), in other words, should be investigated as something resulting from the translation, not as the starting point to identify what has been translated. Otherwise, translations with a high degree of adaptation and “failed translations” would be completely unrecognisable as translations: success cannot be considered a valid criterion for the recognition of what was attempted.

A purely external investigation, then, would fail to identify what was translated or, even, whether a translation took place at all. It seems that the only way to solve this conundrum, then, is to refer to the translators’ own intentions and to investigate their own experience, so to speak, from within. These intensions might be partially reconstructed by analysing preparatory material like notes and scripts, but even when these are available, the fact that they were never intended to be useful to anybody else but the comedians themselves still calls for an investigation of their meaning from within their authors’ experience.

It is now clear, then, that the main methodological approach needs to be the investigation of the translator’s experience, i.e. it needs to be phenomenological. Moving to the discussion of what specific phenomenological methods to choose, the starting point needs to be, again, the recognition that in the present investigation translation cannot be assumed by the researcher
and that whether it takes places or not needs to be part of the investigation itself. This makes Think Aloud Protocol (TAP)\footnote{For an introduction, with particular reference to its relevance for Translation Studies, see for instance, Bernardini (2002).} not applicable, since it is a method of analysis that is supposed to be applied during the translation and hence presupposes that it is known when, and a fortiori whether, a translation is taking place. Moreover, the performance that is observable in bilingual stand-up comedy is not the performance of translating, but its (putative) result as a comedy performance in the target language. With the few exceptions of when the comedians’ linguistic competence allows them to perform a sort of translation on the stage, the translation performance itself might have happened well in advance of the comedy performance and might even have been scattered in time (one punch line every day, for instance), which again makes the application of the TAP methodology not feasible for the present purposes. Some researchers, particularly in the field of software usability testing, have proposed the notion of retrospective TAP (for a general discussion, see Van Den Haak, De Jong & Jan Schellens 2003; for a discussion of its application to translation, see Göpferich & Jääskeläinen 2009). This modified version of TAP, however, just entails that participants are simply allowed to fully concentrate on their task and then asked to describe their experience soon afterwards. The argument that oral self-translation of stand-up comedy is too asynchronous and possibly even scattered in time to be investigated via TAP can also be applied, then, to retrospective TAP.

A methodological approach more suitable to the current purposes seems, instead, to be presented by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodology was originally developed in the field of medical psychology and aims “to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn 2008:53). For instance, an investigation on chronic pain conducted via IPA focused on how participants perceived a change in their sense of themselves and in their behaviour towards other people resulting from their condition (Smith & Osborn 2008:67–70). This aim is pursued by means of a detailed analysis of a limited number of cases via a set of semi-structured interviews and the active interpretation of the results. Each of these key features of IPA will be discussed for their relevance and applicability to the present study. For now, however, it will suffice to say that IPA makes explicit some methodological tenets that have been clear to me from the start of this research. For instance, it soon became clear to me that it was fundamental to investigate the biographical background of each bilingual comedian, to assess, among other things, their different grades of competence regarding the two languages, their different grades of experience in performing
comedy in these two languages (including whether they started comedy in Italy or in the UK) and so on. It also soon became clear to me, then, that a detailed analysis of each case was needed and that the set of the questions posed should be left open, to adapt the interview to each specific case. The same applies to the importance of an internal, phenomenological approach, since it soon appeared difficult to me, for instance, to make any sense of the comedian’s preparatory notes without asking the comedians themselves what sense they made of them. The reference to IPA allows these needs and aims to be recognised and made explicit as part of a coherent methodology. Indeed, as Madden (2010) wrote, “a methodology is a justification of the use of a particular set of methods” (2010:25), the choice of which was not dictated by it but was grounded, as it will be made clearer below, on my own experience with the phenomenon of bilingual comedy.

Not all methods used in this study, however, can find their justification in a single recognised methodology. Because of its phenomenological emphasis, in fact, IPA does not offer much support to any attempt to go beyond the purely phenomenological and interpretative analysis, towards the building a theory of the phenomenon. Consequently, the desire to leave this possibility open requires borrowing techniques and principles from other, more theory-oriented methodologies, particularly inductive analysis (Hammersley 1989) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), which will be discussed further on.

3.2 The sample of this study

The focus on the particular is one of the principal tenets of IPA (Smith, Flower & Larkin 2009). In the present research, the main reason why a detailed analysis of each case is needed seems to be that the different backgrounds and motivations of the comedians interviewed represent, apparently, factors that are decisive in determining or influencing whether a translation behaviour actually occurs or does not occur, in what direction (or directions) it occurs, to what extent this translation behaviour occurs and what challenges it poses to the translator. A fine-graded investigation is, then, needed to map, so to speak, this diversity of translation behaviours.

According to Smith, Flower & Larkin (2009:49), in IPA research “participants are selected on the basis that they can grant us to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study”. This suggestion, however, raises the question of how the researchers can know in advance what particular perspective the putative participants can grant them. Here there seems to be a danger of introducing an element of circularity, given that exploring and revealing the
participant’s perspective on the phenomenon should actually be among the principal aims of the interviews themselves.

Some help can be found in the concept of theoretical sampling proposed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) as part of their grounded theory methodology, an inductive methodology in which the theory is produced from the data during the data collection itself. The main advantage of IPA, in fact, consists in offering a method to “make sense of the participant’s experience”. Its anti-theoretical bias, however, means that the researcher is not offered much help in trying to answer questions that seem to require some reference to theoretical assumptions or hypotheses, such as the present question of how to choose the participants. It is here that the theoretical sampling principle proposed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) might come to the rescue: “sampling should follow theoretical relevance” (1967:49). They explain further:

The researcher chooses any groups that will help generate, to the fullest extent, as many properties of the categories as possible and that will help relate categories to each other and to their properties. (1967:49)

In the present study, for instance, some theoretical categories that were considered as sampling criteria, and their possible properties, were the following (the properties are in brackets):

- The language in which participants started doing comedy (in the native language; in the second language);
- The extent of comedy experience in the first language in their native country (four groups are envisaged here: none; less than one year; one to five years; longer than five years);
- The extent of comedy experience in the second language (none; less than one year; one to five years; longer than five years);

Applying these categories, the following table of combinations can be produced, with each combination defining a sample:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second language comedy experience</th>
<th>Native language and country comedy experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1 year</td>
<td>R. Puma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>L. Cupani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;5 years</td>
<td>G. Garofalo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participant by length of comedy experience in their native and second language.

In the course of the study, however, it became clear that the limited pool of bilingual comedians I had access to meant that theoretical sampling could not represent the only selection criterion. A further criterion for the choice of participants thus became their accessibility to me and my familiarity with their work and with their cultural and linguistic background. From this point of view, an “inner core” of participants is constituted by those Italian comedians who, like myself, performed regularly at the London Puma comedy club (Romina Puma, Giada Garofalo, Luca Cupani and Federica Bonomi). I have known some of them for many years and I have the frequent opportunity to observe them develop, translate and perform material in both Italian and English. The fact that they translate from / to my own native language means that I also have the competence required to explore the more specifically linguistic aspects of their translation behaviour.

The latter point still applies to the second tier of participants, who, on the other hand, differ from those in the first tier because I am less familiar with their work and with the comedy scene in which they mostly operate. This layer is constituted by those Italy-based Italian comedians who sometimes perform in English in the UK, typically at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (Antonello Taurino and Francesco De Carlo, for instance). These participants have in common a greater awareness, in comparison with those of the previous group, of Italy’s comedy scene and of the more culture-specific (as opposed to language-specific) aspects of doing comedy in Italy,
as well as of the comparison with doing comedy in the UK. Linguistic aspects of translation are still explored in the interviews with these participants, so questions on these aspects are still asked, but (also, probably, because of the lesser degree to which these participants are familiar with the English language) in these interviews social considerations tend to come to the foreground, with particular attention to the differences between the two comedy scenes.

A further layer is represented by those participants with whom I do not share the same linguistic and cultural background, but whom I consider key figures in the more general phenomenon of bilingual comedy: the Swede Magnus Bertnér, the Greek Katerina Vrana and the British-Venezuelan Francis Foster. The first has been doing bilingual comedy for many years at a very high level in many countries and can offer a contribution to a better understanding of the dimension represented by the different audiences’ cultures and comedy scenes, with the language (non-native English) being a constant. The second represents a very interesting case of a comedian who developed her style and material outside her home country, that is to say in the UK, and then transferred it very successfully to her native Greece, so she can offer a contribution to the understanding of how bilingual comedy reflects issues of diaspora, homecoming and culture shocks, including the shock of returning to the home country. A degree of theoretical sampling was, then, at the origin of the choice of Bertnér and Vrana. Finally, Francis Foster, who performed an opening set in Spanish for Eddie Izzard, allowed (along with Francesco De Carlo, who is part of Eddie Izzard’s Comedians sans Frontieres collective) the discussion of the aims, principles and activities of this key player in the field of international comedy, who was not available to be interviewed.

All these participants are Western-style stand-up comedians. The case of Katsura Sunshine represents, so to speak, an anomaly: he is a Japan-based, Canadian-born performer of the traditional Japanese storytelling form of Rakugo (both in English and in Japanese, in Japan and abroad). I decided to include his experience in the present study as an extreme case of mediation between two cultures and languages that are usually perceived as very remote, which as such might contribute to the exploration of questions of specificity and universality of humour (again, this case of sampling was also partly theoretical).

These layers of familiarity also correspond to different ways in which I first entered in contact with the participants: I met the “inner core” on the London comedy scene, but most of the other at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I chose, in fact, to interview only comedians I know personally and whom I have seen performing live.
3.3 The interviews of this study

One more aspect in which the present study follows the IPA methodology is the preference for one-to-one, semi-structured interview over structured or open ones. The semi-part of a semi-structured interview, in fact, allows the researcher to adapt each interview to the exploration of the specific experiential world of the interviewee. For instance, when interviewing the comedian Luca Cupani I could not avoid asking him about his Catholic faith. This theme does not seem to have any direct connection with questions of translation. In the highly secular and often explicitly atheistic world of stand-up comedy, however, Luca’s faith represents such a strikingly peculiar aspect of his experiential world that it can hardly be ignored in trying to depict the big picture in which to locate his translation behaviour. As Smith & Osborn (2008) note:

> The investigator has an idea of the area of interest and some questions to pursue. At the same time, there is a wish to try to enter, as far as possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent. (2003:58-59)

A second reason why IPA researchers prefer to keep their interviews only semi-structured is that this reflects the idea that “the participant is the experiential expert on the topic in hand” (Smith, Flower & Larkin 2009:58) and, consequently, should be trusted in guiding the interview towards potentially unexpected (to the interviewer) directions, which “because they arise unprompted, they may well be of particular importance to the participant” (Smith, Flower & Larkin 2009:58).

To provide an example, Giada Garofalo’s insistence on the phonetic and rhythmic aspects of the Italian and English languages, and on their importance in her choice of what to translate and how, was completely unprompted by me and revealed an interestingly new perspective on the subject (see Appendix A.1).

On the other end, the structured part of semi-structured interviews allows for some key questions to always be included in the interviews, hence preparing the ground for comparisons and for the investigation of similarities. For instance, the question of whether the comedian has started comedy in their native or in their second language is clearly a key question for this research and as such was asked of every participant. What makes this question a key question, however, is some sort of implicit hypothesis on the importance of this priority in time on the following translation behaviours. There is also the possibility that the participants’ responses might actually constitute evidence against the importance of this factor. The choice of future questions is, then, influenced by the findings themselves.
Another important aspect of the interviewing process is the language in which the interviews are conducted. For obvious reasons of linguistic competence, the main focus of this study is on comedians who, like me, perform in English and Italian. In these cases, the interviewer and the interviewees share two languages, both relevant to the study, and a choice needs to be made about what language to use in the interview. The method I have decided upon consists of a) letting the interviewees decide, to be sure that they feel as comfortable as possible and b) analysing their choice as part of the data, along with all the behaviours that might derive from this choice. For example, Giada Garofalo chose Italian but kept switching to English, with a much higher frequency than the other interviewees who made the same choice, a phenomenon that will need to be investigated as a possible indication of her level of familiarity and frequency of practice with her second language.

The interviews are digitally recorded and performed face-to-face in a variety of settings, according to the participant’s choice and best convenience. Locations varied from public places (as in the cases of Bertnér, Bonomi, Katsura, Foster), the participant’s house (Puma, Garofalo) or my own house (Taurino). This variation in the settings is, of course, associated with my level of familiarity with the participants, with the greater level of formality of the setting associated with a lesser degree of familiarity. The estimated duration, which is communicated as such to the participant in the consent form, is of one hour, which also seems to constitute the average actual duration. Actual individual durations, however, vary from a minimum of 30 minutes (Bertnér) to a maximum of two hours (Taurino). This is a consequence of the semi-structured nature of the interviews. A key set of questions are asked in all cases, namely:

**Questions about personal context and experience**

The aim of the questions in this set is to reconstruct the personal context of the participant, with specific reference to their exposure to, and positioning towards, the two languages. The questions are as follows:

- When and why did you start performing stand-up comedy?
- Did you start in your native language or in your second language?
- How long afterwards did you start doing comedy in the other language?

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36 With the exception of the supplementary interview with Giada Garofalo (Appendix A.1.3), which was conducted via Skype.
Questions about creating material

The aim of the questions is to explore the oral / written dimension of the (translated) text, in particular with regard to its possible co-variation with the choice of language. The term “write” is in quotation marks to indicate that, in the interviews, it was made clear to participants that the question regarded any method of developing / fixing / memorising etc. their material, which included but did not presuppose the methods of writing it word-by-word to the page. The questions are as follows:

- How do you “write” your material?
- Does your “writing” technique change according to the language?

Questions about translation

The aim of this set of questions is to investigate whether, according to the participant’s experience, translation of material takes place, how it takes place and with what results. During the first interviews collected, the question was: “Do you translate any of your material between the two languages?”, but I then realised that this way the response was dependent on the participant’s own implicit definition of “translation”, as will be discussed in the relevant results discussion section, i.e. section 5.1, at pp. 100-104. In later interviews, then, the question was whether, according to the participant, there was “overlapping” of material between the two languages. In cases where the answer was affirmative, the reasons of this overlapping were investigated. The implicit definition of translation applied to answer the first version of the question was compared, after being made explicit through discussion, to the discussion of the “overlapping” mentioned in the second, in order to achieve a certain level of qualitative comparability among the results. In some cases, however, the theme of the overlapping / translation of material was introduced spontaneously by the participants, so the question was not asked explicitly. Once the participants recognised in their translation activity the source of this overlapping, the questions became explicitly focused on that activity. The questions (or, better, the topics of discussion, since, again, sometimes it was not necessary to ask explicitly them as questions) are as follows:

- To what extent does your material in the two languages overlap?
- If you translated material, what was the direction(s) of the translation?
- How do you choose what material to translate?
• What are the main difficulties you faced during translation?
• How do you deal with wordplay during translation?
• How do you deal with culture-specific references during translation?

Questions about performance

The aim of this set of question is to investigate whether and how, according to the participant, the choice of language influences their performance of stand-up comedy, with particular reference to the feelings (confidence, inhibition etc.) and the different styles (deadpan, expressive etc.) associated with it. The questions are as follows:

• Do you “feel differently” when you perform in each language?
• Do you think that your performance style changes according to the language?

Questions about comedy scenes

This set of questions is aimed at investigating the role played by the context of the performance, with specific references to: venue, audience composition and behaviour, economic considerations, expectations and norms related to comedy. The term comedy scene (as will be made clear in the discussion, particularly in section 5.9 at pp. 129-136) is an umbrella term, easily understandable to the participants themselves, which captures all these aspects, but is also more specific than context or the simple name of the nation / culture (Italy, UK, Anglo-American culture etc.). In particular, audiences’ reactions to so-called taboo subjects were given specific attention not only because of the great role they play in comedy in general, but also because of the hypothesis (later corroborated by the data) that the differences in the sensitivity to perceived taboo violations was correlated to the differences between the comedy scenes, to a greater degree than to the differences between the national contexts or cultures. This allows, conversely, the difference in sensitivity to this topic to be investigated as an indicator of the importance of the comedy scene. The questions are as follows:

• What differences do you see between the two (or more) comedy scenes in which you performed? (This might include discussion on: venues, audience composition and behaviour and economic considerations.)
• Do you see any differences in the sensitivity towards “taboo subjects” between the two different comedy scenes?
As always happens with semi-structured interviews, more questions were sometimes asked, which were either participant-specific or were suggested by the discussion itself. Prompts are also used to elicit a clarification or a further development of a point or, more rarely, to challenge it. The recording is then transcribed and, as mentioned above, a translation is performed when needed. In the process of transcribing and translating the interview, the principal aim is to achieve clarity in conveying the participant’s thoughts, as opposed to any attempt to convey “colour” or to mimic the participant’s communication style. For instance, repetitions and hesitations are removed and arguments are sometimes summarised or expanded for clarity. The ethical concerns that might arise from this treatment of the interviews are, again, addressed by asking the participants to check the transcribed interview and to express any concern they might have, as described in greater detail in the next section.

3.4 Ethical considerations

In most interview-based researches, interviews are anonymised. In the case of the present study, on the contrary, the interviewees were asked for their authorisation to be identified, as part of the customary Interview Consent Form (Appendix C). One reason for this choice is that one of the aims of the interviews is to locate the participant within their personal background, making effective anonymity a difficult goal to achieve in this specific case. Moreover, all the participants in the present study are comedians and, as such, people with a public persona. Publishing their name will allow, for instance, anybody interested to search for a comedian’s videos on the internet and to gain, that way, an even better knowledge of the background in which to locate their interviews. Finally, the fact that the participants have a public persona independent from this study has the effect of minimising the risks associated with renouncing anonymity.

In light of the renunciation to anonymity, as a further safety net it was decided that the participants would be sent for approval the edited and, when pertinent, translated transcript of their interview, offering them the chance to express any concern and/or to ask for any correction or clarification. This was judged of particular importance in the case of translated interviews, since the participants were offered the opportunity to express any concern related to the researcher’s translation decisions. In an instance when this happened, although not for reasons of translation, one participant asked me to remove from the transcription a specific sensitive biographical detail, even if it had already been publicly discussed in one of their comedy shows. The ephemeral nature of oral communication, it seems, allows for a level of
disclosure which is not allowed by the permanency of the transcription. For this reason, the audio recording of the interviews, which were executed digitally on a smart phone, are safely stored on electronic media not publicly accessible. As mentioned above, the setting of the interview varies from the researcher’s house, to the participant’s, to public places. The choice was left to the participants to offer them the type of environment in which they would feel most relaxed and comfortable.

Finally, the Interview Consent Form (Appendix C) also informed the participants that the content of their interview would be useful for future publications, including this thesis, and asked for their consent. Moreover, the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) informed participants on the purpose of the study, the reasons of their choice as participants, the benefits of their participation and the practicalities of the interview. It also offered them a channel of communication to express any complaint or concern. All this went through the appropriate channels of Surrey’s ethical scrutiny and approval was secured.

3.5 From experience to data

IPA is not only a phenomenological approach, but it is also an interpretative approach. Smith & Osborn (2008) define their approach as a case of double hermeneutic, defined as follows:

The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. (2008:53)

IPA, then, according to its proponents, takes a “middle ground” (Smith, Flower & Larkin 2009:36) between what Ricoeur (1970) calls a hermeneutics of empathy, on one hand, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other. For instance, when interviewing Giada Garofalo, I collected from her the following statement: “I don’t translate” (GG:82-83). From what she said later, however, I came to the conclusion that her initial statement was probably due to an implicit notion of translation that did not appear to be consistent. By challenging her own interpretation, I ensured that her successive statements, in which she described and justified what clearly appeared, even within her own implicit definition of the term, as translation decisions, could be interpreted in a more coherent way. This move was made both particularly important and delicate by the decision, explained in section 2.5 at pp. 47-48, to adopt the assumption of translation from the participants as the main criterion to detect translation activities.
Another important aspect of the methodology is the analysis of the themes that emerge from the interviews. Appendix A.11 represents an index of all the themes that have been identified in the interviews, with the specification of the line, or range of lines, within the interviews’ transcription where they occur. With regard to the analysis and discussion of these themes, Smith & Osborn (2008) observe:

Two broad presentation strategies are possible. In the first, the ‘results’ section contains the emergent thematic analysis, and the separate ‘discussion’ links that data analysis to the extant literature. An alternative strategy is to discuss the links to the literature as one presents each superordinate theme in a single ‘results and discussion’ section. (2008:76)

In this study, the second strategy is preferred: chapters 4-6 represent its “results and discussion” section, in which superordinate themes (for instance, the impact of the choice of language on comedian’s performance or the challenges to translation posed by wordplay) are discussed with references to the literature. In some sections these themes are presented as emerging from the data, in others it is the literature that offers the starting point of the discussion and the discussion is then grounded on these themes and, hence, on the data. In any case, they were not produced through a progressive bottom-up aggregation of increasingly general themes, as is suggested, instead, by Smith & Osborn (2008:67-76), among others. On the contrary, the identification of the superordinate themes (which are not shown in table format, but which, in most cases, correspond to the subsections of this thesis) often preceded the identification of the more specific themes listed in Appendix A.11 (pp. 284-312), in a top-down movement. One reason why this approach emerged can be found in my own personal position vis-à-vis the subject of this study: I have decided to undertake this study after years of participating in the phenomenon it studies, i.e. bilingual comedy. Consequently, I am reflexively conscious that the starting point of this study is not represented by the data collected, but by the impressions registered and the hypotheses developed in those years, through both self-observation and direct observation of other bilingual comedians. I am, therefore, aware of the complex relationship, in this study, between impressions and hypotheses that preceded the study itself, the data collected in its course and the theoretical generalisations, which are based on both. To make sense of this complexity, an eclectic methodological approach is needed, in which the data-centric approach described and recommended by IPA is complemented with a greater acknowledgment of this complex relationship between data and theory. To this
purpose, the *inductive analysis* methodology proposed by Hammersley (1989) can be very useful, which the author illustrates with this diagram (1989:170):

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1: Inductive analysis process flow (adapted from Hammersley, 1989:170).**

It is important to note, in this sense, that the starting point of the flowchart in Figure 1 is not data collection, but the *definition of the phenomenon*. The present research focuses on investigating a phenomenon defined as *oral self-translation of stand-up comedy* as proposed in Chapter 2. While these theoretical assumptions are pre-empirical (in the sense that they precede the study’s data collection), the flowchart in Figure 1 makes it clear that they can be revised as a result of the empirical part of the research. For instance, the definition of the phenomenon as *oral self-translation* would be refuted by the hypothetical discovery that the majority of stand-up comedians involved in the research write their scripts word-by-word and follow them strictly in their performances. Moreover, these definitions and the anticipation of observation associated with them, although precedent to the study’s data collection, are grounded in my own experience with the phenomenon investigated. It is this experience, for instance, which firstly guided me in deciding what questions were likely to be the most relevant for an exploration of this phenomenon.
The role of self-observation, however, should not be seen as limited to the “Start” quadrant of the flowchart in figure 1. In interpreting the replies of the participants, I am, in fact, constantly taking advantage of my own experience in this field. Even the questions themselves are often presented as a request to confirm, or contradict, my own pre-interpretation of the topic, derived from self-observation. The same applies to every attempt to generalise the results, in the sense that only a generalisation that is compatible with both the data collected via the interviews and my own personal experience will appear acceptable to me. However, being itself interpreted experience, my own personal experience, i.e. my own interpretation of it, is itself sometimes modified in the light of the new evidence collected through the interrogation of others. Ethnographer Alessandra Fasulo (2013) notes with reference to the anthropological research on objects that are part of the researcher’s “home” environment:

[...] the relationship of the ethnographers with individual participants yields more visibly in the write-up, while the ethnographer, qualifying as an apprentice or an equal member of the community, becomes herself or himself a legitimate source of ethnographic data. (2013:269)

One way in which my relationship with individual participants becomes visible in this study is, again, the fact that I bring to the discussion my own experience of observing the performance of the participants. This experience plays a major role in deciding what questions to ask. For instance, I noticed that Romina Puma dropped, after some unsuccessful attempts, her opening line about her name from the English translation of her standard comedy club set and, later, I noticed that she decided to remove it from the Italian set too. This prompted me to ask her the reasons behind this decision. Moreover, as already mentioned, during the interviews my own hypotheses and tentative interpretations of the phenomena discussed are often proposed to the participants, while repartees and jokes are sometimes also exchanged. This might be interpreted as a shift from formal and stylistic expectations associated with interviews as part of more external methodological approaches. As Fasulo (2013) notices, after introducing the term autoethnography\(^\text{37}\) (2013:270) to indicate the area of ethnographic research in which the researcher belongs to the group that is investigated:

Autoethnographies fight against the “othering” of any individual, group, or ethnicity, stressing instead the continuity of experience between authors, informants and readers; as “othering” is embedded in inherited ways of

\(^{37}\) For a more systematic and extensive exposition of autoethnography, see Adams, Jones & Ellis (2015).
representing culture, resisting it coincides with a shift towards innovative styles of representation aimed to reduce the distance between those parties. (2013:271)

Although the risk of “othering” was probably much lower than in ethnographic studies, in this study’s interviews the continuity of experience between the researcher and the participants is also expressed through, in this case, a markedly conversational style of interviewing.

3.6 From data to theory

If data collection, being dependent on the researcher’s experience and hypotheses prior to it, is theory-laden, the relationship is, of course, bidirectional: data are collected and interrogated for theory’s generation and falsification, to use Karl Popper’s term. If the new data collected do not fit the original hypotheses, new hypotheses that do fit them are generated, to be further corroborated against data collected in the future. For example, an attempt can be made to generalise the relationship between translating material into another language on one hand and “writing down” the material on the other. A first theoretical hypothesis might be the following:

When translating some oral material into another language, stand-up comedians tend to produce a written text in the target language.

When interviewing Luca Cupani and Romina Puma, however, it became apparent that both of them tend to write down material word-by-word when they write in English, but they do not need to do so for their Italian version; in addition, they reported that this is also true for material that was first performed in English and only later translated into Italian. A theoretical hypothesis aptly revised to fit these new data will, then, reads as follows (the changes to the initial hypothesis presented above are marked in italics):

When translating some oral material from their native language into their second language, stand-up comedians tend to produce a written text in the target language.

I then proceeded to interviewing Giada Garofalo and she reported how she uses translation into another language as an opportunity to improve on her ambition to be “less scripted”. This appeared to be completely unrelated to the directionality of the translation, i.e. included cases when Garofalo moved from a written text in her native Italian to an oral text into English, her second language, thus contradicting this second hypothesis. At this stage, in order to produce a further revised hypothesis that fit the new insight present in the interview, the knowledge of
the different situations and backgrounds of the participants came to the foreground. It soon appeared clear to me, in fact, that it might be relevant that at the time of their interviews Luca Cupani had been living in the UK for one year, Romina Puma for four years, and Giada Garofalo for 13 years. I then revised the hypothesis as follows:

When translating some oral material from a language in which they are highly competent into another in which they are significantly less competent, stand-up comedians tend to produce a written text in the target language.

It is important to note how, as opposed to what happens when using a purely deductive method, it is difficult to predict in advance what aspects of the participant’s context will be useful in the future to formulate or revise a specific hypothesis. Indeed, when I interviewed Luca Cupani and Romina Puma, the hypothesis still did not include any reference to the level of competence in the two languages and hence did not require, for its corroboration, any question meant to document this competence, such as the number of years spent in the UK. It was only when the hypothesis was contradicted by the experience reported by Giada Garofalo that, retrospectively, this information became relevant. This impossibility to predict what will become relevant in the future explains and justifies the choice to try to offer a picture as wide as possible of the participant’s experiential world.

During the study, however, it soon became apparent that discussing fine-graded hypotheses of specific aspects of the subject matter, such as the one presented above, would be too restrictive and would translate into a fragmentary exposition. More than around specific predictions, which could be subjected to yes/no corroboration or falsification, the study focused on more general questions, investigated, again, through the interrogation of the participants’ own experiences of them. The abstract issue of the oral or written origin of stand-up comedy, for instance, led to the question of whether participants feel that their performance is more oral-like, or more scripted, in their first language or in their second language and of whether the participants perceive that this has any impact on its efficacy. Similarly, questions on humour translatability were investigated through the participants’ perception of the success / failure rate of their own translations and the difficulties they experienced through them. The aim of the investigation, then, became the search for a more general understanding of the phenomenon of orally self-translating stand-up comedy. This resulted in the decision to structure the exposition around general themes (orality, translatability, effect of language selection on performance, effect of language selection on identity negotiation etc.), instead of fine-graded hypotheses,
discussed in the light of both the data collected and the extant literature. The identification of these questions and themes as theoretically relevant, however, is itself based on hypotheses and, hence, is open to corroboration or falsification against the data. For instance, whether bilingual comedians translate their material represents both a question and a starting hypothesis of this study: the very intention of conducting a study in the field of Translation Studies would have been difficult to envisage without starting from the hypothesis that some translation is definitely taking place. This hypothesis was, again, based on my own experience. In typical phenomenological fashion, however, at the start of this study, the existence of this type of translation was “put in brackets”, to allow for the participants’ experience to be interrogated afresh, so to speak, and for the conditions of recognition of this type of translation to be discussed and proposed. The data collected, then, offered corroboration to the (methodologically suspended) original hypothesis that there is some translation activity going on in bilingual comedy. Moreover, it contributed to a better understanding of the extent and modality of this translation.

Finally, this experiential world was also investigated to reconstruct the audience reception to their original and/or translated performances. In fact, at one point the investigation of audience reception by means of a questionnaire was considered and then abandoned. One reason why it was abandoned was logistical: the London Puma bilingual comedy night, which would have offered the opportunity to investigate audience reception vis-à-vis comedy performances in different languages, was discontinued at the end of 2016. For the same reason, the idea of recording videos of the performances in both languages to discuss with the participants (to investigate, for instance, the possible influence of language selection on use of gesture) was also abandoned. On the other hand, the recognition that comedians conduct a continuous analysis and evaluation of their own performances, in order to develop it in the most effective way, made this absence of bilingual video-recorded material appear less relevant. Indeed, it is the recollection of this self-perception at the time when material was developed that, in the end, was considered central to the investigation of the performance dimension of bilingual comedy, since it plays a role in the development of the performance itself.

In conclusion, the methodological approach to this study consists of an iterative exchange between my own pre-theoretical comprehension of the phenomenon, derived from my own participation in it, the data collected during the study and the theoretical generalisations grounded on them. The data, in turn, is the result of the participants’ interpretation of their own experiences, prompted by the dialogic exchange that took place during the interviews. As was
very effectively stated by the anthropologist Paul Rabinow ([1977] 2007), in terms that can be generalised to the social sciences in general:

anthropological analysis must incorporate two facts: first, that we ourselves are historically situated through the questions we ask and the manner in which we seek to understand and experience the world; and second, that what we receive from our informants are interpretations, equally mediated by history and culture. Consequently, the data we collect is doubly mediated, first by our own presence and then by the second-order self-reflection we demand from our informants. ([1977] 2007:119)

At the same time, this exchange also allowed me to gain a better understanding of my own experience, according to Paul Ricoeur’s often quoted definition of interpretation as “self-understanding my means of understanding others” ([1969] 2004:16). Moreover, just like some sets of data are inevitably more theory-laden than others, some parts of the theory developed in this study are more data-grounded, while others are more abstract and speculative. The topic of the next chapter (the first “results and discussion” section of this study), as will soon be clear, belongs very much to the latter.
4 Inside the text: a theoretical model of the mental text of stand-up comedy and its translation

In Chapter 2, the notion of mental text was postulated as a purely heuristic theoretical device to make sense of the notion of translation in the absence of a written text, a black box the nature of which was deemed outside the scope of observation. In light of the complex relationship between the empirical and the theoretical aspects of the present investigation illustrated in the previous chapter, however, such a dichotomy does not seem justified any longer. Indeed, a theoretical model of what the mental text might consist of (in other words, an attempt to look into the black box) would be predominantly speculative in nature. On the other hand, it is possible that some aspects of it, for instance a theoretical account of how the mental text might be stored in memory, could be evaluated for their consistency with the phenomenological evidence collected. In the following sections, first, such a theoretical model of mental text is outlined and discussed and, secondly, is applied to the proposal of a theoretical model for what happens in the process of oral self-translation.

4.1 Memory and the double nature of the mental text: declarative and procedural

Starting from the monolingual perspective, the notion of mental text has been introduced in order to explain what, in an essentially oral form such as stand-up comedy, is relatively constant in time within a series of performances. The ethnologist Lauri Honko (1996), indeed, proposed this notion to explain what he found constant in a series of oral performances from the singers on the Silk Road:

To be able to understand the production of text in actual performance, it seems necessary to postulate a kind of “pre-narrative,” a pre-textual frame, that is, an organized collection of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer’s mind. This material consists of (1) textual elements and (2) generic rules for reproduction; we may call it a “mental text.” (1996:1)

Research participant Katerina Vrana similarly reports in her interview:

GP – What can you tell me about your writing process?

KV – I don’t write.
The mental text, then, seems first of all to be something that is “present in the singer’s [or comedian’s, in our case] mind” across time, i.e. that is stored. Similarly, in his attempt to propose a theory of humorous texts, Attardo mentions the need to recognise “the presence of a ‘storage area’ for the information that is being assumed, shared and developed by the text” (1996:88). The abstractness of the term storage area is probably due to the fact that the paper was originally developed in the course of a workshop about computational humour, but in the all too human context of the present study the term memory is sufficiently comprehensive. An investigation of memory in oral tradition has been attempted by Rubin (1995), although with a specific interest for mnemonic techniques. In more general terms, talking about memory would allow this investigation to take advantage of the considerable literature dedicated to this subject in the fields of cognitive psychology and neurology, for instance with regard to the classification of the different types of memory. Indeed, the second aspect of the mental text described in the passage quoted is its composite nature: a mental text is constituted both by “textual elements” (Honko 1996:1) and by “rules of production” (Ibid.). If we consider, then, that the mental text is stored in memory, the question arises of whether these different types of content are stored in different types of memory. Answering this question would afford a better understanding of what the contents of a mental text might actually consist of.

Many authors in the field of cognitive science distinguish between declarative and procedural memory (for a brief literature review, see Ullman 2004). These two types of memory will now be briefly introduced and considered, in turn, as exclusive candidates for the type of memory associated with the notion of mental text. This discussion will offer a reductio ad absurdum of considering only one type of memory, corroborating the hypothesis of the double nature (both declarative and procedural) of the mental text.

First, declarative memory “refers to the capacity for conscious recollection about facts and events” (Squire 2004:174) and “can be divided into semantic memory (facts about the world) and episodic memory (the capacity to re-experience an event in the context in which it originally occurred” (Ibid.). An example of a task requiring and utilising declarative memory (of a semantic nature) is the memorisation and recollection of the lines of a play. If the mental text of stand-up comedy was purely stored in declarative / semantic memory, then, it would not be different in
kind from the playtext as it is memorised by an actor. Such an account, however, would fail to provide an explanation for the greater level of “fluidity” (for instance, the level of improvisation and variation) that can be noted in stand-up comedy in comparison to theatre acting. A suggestion of how to overcome this difficulty is offered by Miller et al. (1960), who consider the very case of remembering the lines of a play:

[...] as every actor knows, there are always those deadly moments when someone skips ahead two pages, thus leaving out essential facts that the audience must know in order to understand the play. Then the scramble begins to get those missing lines spoken somehow, and the most exciting part of amateur acting, except for the curtain calls, is often connected with this adventure of trying to cover everything without letting the audience know that the author did not write it that way. (1960:133-134)

Along these lines, a way of describing the relationship between rigid textuality and fluidity in the oral performance of stand-up comedy would consist of describing it as the result of some sort of “intentionally bad acting”. According to this model, performances would be based on a text stored in memory that, in itself, would be as scripted and detailed as the text of any play. Stand-up comedians, however, would apply to the delivery of this text a performance technique specific to stand-up comedy, which consists of the ability to add intentional hesitations, improvised detours, audience responses and so on. The oral-like fluidity of stand-up comedy, then, would be the result of a particular performance style, more than an intrinsic characteristic of the mental text itself, which would be as written-like, so to speak, as any other text written for the stage.

This suggestion raises the obvious question of whether such a model is consistent with the experience of doing comedy as it is perceived by the comedians themselves. For instance, in her interview, participant Romina Puma talked about an early phase in her development as a bilingual comedian, when weak linguistic competence in English required her to learn a script by heart:

[...] In Italian I could write down some “bullet points” only and improvise from there, but I didn’t trust myself to do the same in English, instead I had to write down and memorise every single word, as we used to do at school with those poems by Giacomo Leopardi! That meant that, on stage, I was terrified, since, for instance, I knew I wouldn’t be able to respond to hecklers. (RP:519-523)
Puma, then, was not happy with the situation. Indeed, later she considered it as an important step forward in her development that she became able to write down and memorise a single word for an entire routine in English, while leaving to the moment of the performance the choice of the complete and exact wording. In her own words:

I’m now at a stage of my development as a performer in English sometimes I don’t feel the need to write word-by-word the English set either. My routine about going to the gym is indicated, in the “script”, by the word “gym” only. I know where to go from there. (RP:557-560)

A similar development path is described by another participant, Magnus Bertnér:

MB – [...] the writing process is very different, when I write in English or in Swedish. In Swedish, usually I don’t write things down, I just have ideas in my head and I go with them. In English, instead, I sit down at the computer and I write a script word-by-word, because it is more difficult for me to find the exact wording, if I leave it to the improvisation of the moment. That is probably also due to the fact that when I work in English I’m more nervous than when I work in Swedish, so I need the reassurance that comes with having everything written down.

GP – Did that change with time?

MB – Yes, I’m much more confident now than when I started, given that I have done two solo shows in English and written almost four hours of material. (MB:1616-1624)

If the “intentionally bad acting” model was valid, however, memorising a full text would be part of what happens in the normal conditions of comedy performance and not only so to speak to its pathological conditions, consisting in this case of weak linguistic skills and/or confidence, which the performer feels the need to overgrow. On the other hand, the fact that remembering the text word-by-word might represent an intermediate stage in the development of a series of performances is consistent with my own recollection of the preparation of my Edinburgh Fringe 2014 show Ride of the Wagnerian. It was a highly thematic show, consisting of a single narrative spanning the entire duration, so it was impossible for me to develop it in short segments that I could try out at comedy clubs, which is how most non-thematic and non-narrative shows are developed. In the absence of a mechanism to “write on the stage” and memorise the text through repetition, I was forced to write a word-by-word script. Consequently, in order to prepare for the performance, I had, first, to learn the script by heart, but, secondly and crucially,
to later “unlearn” it, i.e. I had to de-structure the text in order to add the required element of fluidity. A similar experience is reported by participant Francis Foster, who thus describes his experience of performing two comedy sets in Spanish on successive nights:

GP – Did you write down the text of your Spanish sets, before the performance?

FF – Yes, I did.

GP – For both sets?

FF – No, only for the first set.

GP – What did you do for your second set, then?

FF – There is this thing you do in acting\(^{38}\) when you learn your words and then you forget them and you just do it. Before my first gig, I went around Barcelona drilling the words into my brain, repeating them over and over again. For the next one, instead, I just went through my material three times, and as a result I was much more fluid with it.

GP – Do you think that the lack of fluidity was one of the reasons why your first set did not work that well?

FF – Yes, I do. At the end, in order to produce a strong eight-minute set at my second night, I must have gone through ten hours’ work, including the translation and the rehearsal.

GP – I imagine one of the problems for you was the lack of opportunities to try your Spanish set on the stage, apart for using your first gig as a try out for your second, right?

FF – Yes, that was all the opportunities I had. (FF:2345-2360)

Similarly, having had myself few opportunities to rehearse the show *Ride of the Wagnerian*, the first performances I delivered were also felt by me, and probably perceived by the audience, as too “scripted”.

\(^{38}\) In this passage, Foster seems to suggest that play acting might not, after all, be that different in nature from performing stand-up comedy, since it also requires the “unlearning” of the text in order to add fluidity to the performance. The difference with stand-up comedy would, then, be more a difference of grade than a difference of kind.
If the model of mental text as “word-by-word script plus fluidising performance skills” considered were correct, at any stage of the performance history of this show I would have been able to go back to delivering the text word-by-word, since the full text would have always been available in my declarative / semantic memory, to which in the meantime I would have only added a better developed technique for delivering it. The choice of the word “unlearn” I’ve used to describe the next step, however, was not incidental: what actually happened is that in a later stage I would not have been able to go back to performing the original script word-by-word any longer: in my memory, it was now replaced by something completely different in nature. A similar experience is shared by Giada Garofalo:

GP – [This script] is written as if to be performed word-by-word. Did you follow it word-by-word in the performance too?

GG – Not at all, for instance there are entire chunks of it that I actually never performed. Other parts were changed, without me updating the written script accordingly. (GG:241-244, emphasis added)

Once the mental text of a show starts its development though performance, its changes are not written down any longer. What seems to happen instead, according to both my personal experience and my observation of other performers’ behaviour, is that comedians usually decide to video record one of their last performances of their Edinburgh Fringe run, in order to have some permanent record of the developments introduced during the run itself. The passage from the written script to what is developed during the oral performances is, to a certain extent, irreversible: whatever was developed is not something that can found its representation on a word-by-word script on paper, even if it is updated. It seems to involve, instead, the addition of something that does not seem to be declarative any longer and which cannot be easily recollected by a conscious act and cannot be described in words.

I suggest that what was both developed and memorised in performance was a “skill” or, in the terminology of Honko (1996:1), a set of rules of production: something that is stored in procedural memory, which indeed is described in the literature as the type of memory that “subserves the learning of new, and the control of established, sensori-motor and cognitive ‘habits’, ‘skills’, and other procedures, such as riding a bicycle and skilled game playing” (Ullman 2004:237). What distinguishes this proposal from the “memorised word-by-word text plus fluidifying performance skills” model is these rules are not “generic” (Honko 1996:1) or, at least, are not only generic: it might be the case that comedians at the end of a long Edinburgh Fringe
might have become, generally speaking, “better comedians” (they learned new generic rules of performance production), but it is even more probable that they have become “better” at performing *that specific show*, i.e. that they have developed new rules of production that are specific to that particular text, to the extent that they should be considered an essential part of it. Comedians, then, video record their performances in order to have some documentation of at least one manifestation in performance of this apparently non-declarative aspect of the mental text, i.e. of what cannot any longer be written down.

This recognition might suggest the possibility of an opposite, but equally monistic model of the mental text of stand-up comedy, as something that is *entirely* stored in procedural memory. In order to investigate the implications of this hypothesis, it is useful to leave the monolingual perspective and consider its consequences for translation. If the mental text behind a series of performances was to be considered as purely procedural, the ability to perform it in more than one language would simply be a factor of the comedian’s linguistic competence. If this were the case, however, there would be no need for any conscious translation activity. There is, indeed, nothing conscious about procedural memory, which for this reason is also referred to as “implicit memory” (Ullman 2004:237). The only form of translation that would be possible would be “translation-on-the-stage”, which, it might be argued, would even not be recognisable as translation at all: performing in another language would be, to apply the classic metaphor for procedural skills, just like riding a different bike.

The phenomenological evidence collected both via the interviews and self-observation, however, seems to be in clear contradiction with this hypothesis: comedians do seem to ask themselves questions of translation, which are both conscious and chronologically antecedent to the performance itself. This was particularly evident in the case of Antonello Taurino, who, before his run at the Edinburgh Fringe 2013, sent me for review a complete English translation of his script (see Appendix A.4.1). Even Giada Garofalo, while on the one hand stressing that most of her translations are “on the stage” (GG:85-86), recognises that there is an exception to this norm:

> The exception is when the punch line of a joke happens to be culture-specific or language-specific, in which case I need to spend more time on finding an equivalent in the other language, in advance of the first performance in it. (GG:88-91)
Self-translation of stand-up comedy, then, seems to represent a conscious activity, at least in part. This in turn implies the need to recognise a declarative element in its memorisation.

It appears, then, that both attempts to make sense of the mental text in either exclusively declarative terms or in exclusively procedural terms lead to consequences that are in contradiction with the evidence collected. A more complete representation of the mental text of stand-up comedy, then, needs to be found in the middle ground between these two extremes, where both those aspects that seem to be based on the conscious recollection of some declarative content and those aspects that seem to require the unconscious deployment of procedural skills can be theoretically justified. Interestingly, this strategy is consistent with Ullman’s (2004) hybrid declarative / procedural model of language in general, in which linguistic competence itself is described as constituted by both declarative (for instance, lexicon) and procedural (for instance, grammar) elements.

As already mentioned, however, the procedural part of the mental text will need not to be limited to some generic rules for reproduction, but will also need to include rules that are specific to a series of performances, i.e. that are part of the mental text behind that series. When preparing for longer sets, for instance, comedians tend to make use of a set list, i.e. a list of the main “topics” that will be covered. This list, however, is not of course delivered as such, but is used to facilitate what psycholinguists call the macroplanning (see for instance: Levelt 1989:5) of a complex sequence of speech acts, defined as “[t]he speaker’s elaboration of a communicative intention by selecting the information whose expression may realise the communicative goal” (Ibid.) Later, indeed, Levelt discusses the suggestion that “macroplanning is procedural in nature” (1989:124). In the case of stand-up comedy, while the information selected might in itself be declarative in nature (it will, for instance, contain the punch lines, on the declarative nature of which more will be said later), the macroplanning of the sequence of its delivery seems indeed to be more akin to a procedural skill. The ability, for instance, to change and adapt this sequence to the specific circumstances of a performance, for example to the specific composition of the audience (as it is shown in many passages by the script collected by Lee 2010) seems, indeed, to be an important element of the skillset required of a stand-up comedian.

Moreover, this double procedural / declarative nature of the mental text, and the distinction between these two aspects, might also shed some light on the relationship between the content of oral discourse and the mode of its production in performance, in other words the “how” in
the customary observation that “it’s how you tell it”. The performative aspects of a mental text, indeed, can be seen as one of the main constituents of its procedural part. More precisely, the procedural skills involved in a performance can be seen as constituting a stratification of layers of skills of different levels of specialisation. The more generic layer will be represented by the language skills (the “mental grammar” in Ullman’s (2004) declarative / procedural model of language, including both language-specific grammar and, if Chomsky’s hypothesis is accepted, universal grammar) and the generic performance skills, such as how to respond to heckles or how to improvise in response to unforeseen circumstances. The more specific layer, on the other hand, will include skills such as what facial expression to associate with a specific punch line or what intonation to deliver it for the best effect. It is this latter part that can be said to be part of the mental text behind a specific series of related performances, for instance of the same Edinburgh Fringe-style one hour show. It is also, again, the development of this part of a show’s mental text that can be documented, at least partly, via the video recording of one or more of the performances produced from it, but not written down in words.

The evidence collected, then, seems to be consistent with the idea of the double declarative / procedural nature of the mental text of stand-up comedy, while both monistic interpretations seem to clash against this evidence. Molineux (2016) also discusses the role of memory in stand-up comedy and recognises two types of memory involved: autobiographical and semantic (2016:9). Autobiographical memory is another way to refer to episodic memory, which, as mentioned above, however, represents, along with semantic memory, a sub-type of declarative memory (Squire 2004:174). This classification, then, while pertinent and theoretically interesting in itself, cannot be considered capable of accounting for the entirety of the phenomena discussed, unless it is complemented by the recognition of the role played by procedural memory.

If this double nature is recognised, however, the question arises of how to represent the relationship between the elements stored as instances of declarative memory and the elements stored as instances of procedural memory. Some help can be offered by the way in which comedians visualise their own text, for instance by means of notes: see, for example, the notes of Luca Cupani (discussed in Appendix A.3.1), reproduced again in the following picture (see Figure 4 in Appendix A.3.1 for a more readable reproduction):
In these notes, we can identify some “isles”, the enclosed boxes, that contain either entire sentences, typically the punch lines, or words that are particularly important for the exact recollection and delivery of the punch line. This bears some resemblance with the role that notes also play, according to Albl-Mikasa (2008), in simultaneous interpreting. More specifically, in opposition to the idea that notes are only used to retrieve the “sense” of the discourse to be interpreted, Albl-Mikasa notes that “there is evidence to suggest that (micro-)propositional processing can play a pivotal role in note-taking” (2008:208), i.e. that notes can facilitate the retrieval of specific propositions. Applying this theory to the sample from Cupani’s notes, it will appear that this propositional function is performed by the boxes of text, some of which do contain the text of entire sentences. On the other hand, the blank areas between these boxes can be seen as a visual representation of those elements of the mental text that are stored in procedural memory: those elements that, not being propositional in content, cannot be represented by means of textual notes.

Surprisingly, this visual representation of the relationship between the declarative and the procedural components of the mental text shows some similarities with a model, now of purely historical interest, suggested in 1904 by the physicist J.J. Thomson for the structure of the atom: the “plum pudding model” (see for instance: Williams 2016, online). The idea is that a scatter of discrete elements (the “plums”, which in Thomson’s atomic model represented the negative charged electrons) is surrounded and enclosed by a cloud of something that is continuous, fluid
and indeterminate (the rest of the “pudding”, originally representing, in Thomson’s atomic model, the positive charge). In the present context, the “plums” are discrete elements of declarative / semantic content, which are surrounded by a “pudding” of procedural abilities. This visualisation seems to capture some of the phenomenological aspects of both remembering and translating mental texts. The first of these aspects is the impression that there are parts of the mental text for which the exact wording is essential, and which are precisely memorised, while there are other parts that are left intentionally indeterminate, as in the example of Cupani’s notes shown in Figure 2. The second is that it is on those declarative elements that comedians can base their hopes and expectations for – to continue with the plum pudding metaphor – the “sweetness” of the text, i.e. its comic efficacy. It might be the case that the improvised elements of a performance will, in the end, prove to be its most comically effective part, but by its nature this effectiveness cannot be predicted in advance, so it is on the “plums” that comedians need to base their hopes for the text to be reliably effective. Moreover, the relative density of the “plums” inside the “plum pudding” will vary according to many factors. The first is the length and type of the performance: a five-minute set for a competition will inevitably need to be more “punchy”, as comedians say, i.e. more based on clearly recognisable punch lines, than a one-hour show for a festival. The second element of variation will be the comedian’s style, according to the classification suggested in section 2.3 at pp. 34-35: the mental text behind the performances of a one-liner comedian such as Jimmy Carr will almost be “all plums”, while the one behind the performances of an improviser such as Ross Noble will be almost “all pudding”.

4.2 Zooming-in on the declarative content of the mental text

While the content of the procedural portion of a mental text will inevitably need to be left largely indeterminate in nature (it is, after all, the part of the model called to justify what is less predictable in the performance of the text), it is now time to focus on the content of the declarative part, in order to investigate what this might actually consist of. First of all, we will discuss the part of it stored in the semantic memory sub-type. For simplicity, until the declarative / episodic part is discussed below, the term “declarative” will be used in the sense of declarative / semantic.

First, the question arises of whether this content is constituted by sentences or propositions. In its article on “structured propositions”, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy introduces the more general concept of “proposition” by a means of a reference to translation:
It is a truism that two speakers can say the same thing by uttering different sentences, whether in the same or different languages. For example, when a German speaker utters the sentence ‘Schnee ist weiss’ and an English speaker utters the sentence ‘Snow is white’, they have said the same thing by uttering the sentences they did. Proponents of propositions hold that, speaking strictly, when speakers say the same thing by means of different declarative sentences, there is some (non-linguistic) thing, a proposition, that each has said. (King 2016, online)

In the case of the mental text behind a series of performances, it is then, again, important to distinguish between the monolingual perspective and the bilingual perspective. In the monolingual perspective, whether, for instance, a punch line will be stored in memory as a proposition or as a sentence will probably depend on whether it derives its effectiveness from its content, for example in the case when a paradoxical or absurd situation is verbally described, or from its form, for instance in the case of wordplay. This distinction, in fact, is almost as old as the theoretical reflexion on humour itself, and was, for instance, reiterated by Joseph Addison in the 18th century (Addison & Steele 1982). It might even be the case that the distinction between humour memorised as propositions and humour memorised as sentences might offer an opportunity to gain a more precise understanding of this time-honoured distinction. A similar suggestion can also be found in the following passage from Eco (2003):

La nozione di contenuto proposizionale invariante sarebbe applicabile, dunque, solo a enunciate molti semplici che esprimono stati del mondo e che, da un lato, non siano ambigui (come accade con le figure retoriche) e dall’altro non siano autoriflessivi, tali cioè da essere prodotti ai fini di attrarre l’attenzione non solo sul loro significato ma sul loro significante (come i valori fonetici o prosodici).

[The notion of a propositional content that does not vary would, then, be only applicable to very simple sentences that describe the facts of the worlds and which, on one hand, are not ambiguous (as in the case of rhetorical topes) and, on the other, are not self-reflexive, i.e. are not produced with the intention of drawing attention not only on their signified, but also on their signifier (for instance, on its phonetic values).] (2003:347, my translation)

Although the importance of wordplay for humour is sometimes overplayed, for instance in the popular idea of humour’s untranslatability, this signifier-based type of humour needs to be taken into account: this need excludes the possibility of describing the memorisation of humour contents in purely propositional terms.

39 That is, of course, provided that there is such a thing as a proposition and that it can be stored in memory, two problems which are, of course, beyond the remits of the present study.
This recognition that the storage of humour in memory might in some cases, even in the monolingual perspective, be sentential in nature, as opposed to propositional, has also been more expressed in the literature. For instance, while discussing the reception of longer humorous texts, Attardo (2001) touches on this issue with specific reference to what he calls the “bridge problem”:

If readers lose track of the surface structure of the text after a relatively short time span, how is it possible that they recognise a bridge (i.e., two related jab or punch lines occurring at a considerable distance from another) when the relation between the two lines is formal (i.e., related to surface structure?). (2001:5)

Regardless of how this is possible, what is important for the present discussion is that “readers recognise these structures and appreciate their humor” (2001:5) and that this “surface structure” is, according to the definition quoted above, exactly what the concept of *propositions* as distinguished from sentences has been developed to abstract from. The same can be said when moving the focus from the reception to the production and reproduction of humour. In other words, in the monolingual perspective, memorisation of a mental text seems to involve the storage and retrieval of both sentences and propositions, according to the nature of humour involved (factual or linguistic).

Moving to the bilingual perspective, if propositions are by definition language-independent, it is clear that the very process of translation will require focusing on the “surface structure” of the sentences themselves: translation will require, in this case, the derivation of a sentence in the target language from a sentence in the source language, both expressing the same proposition. From now on, then, given that the main focus of this study is on translation, the declarative part of a mental text will be described as constituted by sentences only.

Secondly, once the general nature of the declarative content of the mental text of stand-up comedy is identified as being composed by sentences (at least where the focus on translation is concerned), the discussion can proceed to investigating which sentences are selected for memorisation. Phenomenological evidence, both based on self-observation and on the interviews collected for this study, seems to suggest that comedians dedicate great attention to the wording first, and the translation later (i.e. to the wording in both the source language and the target language), of those parts of discourse from which they expect a humorous response:

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40 This detour on propositions and sentences is required because the concept of “propositional attitude” and/or “sentential attitude” will be used later on in the outlining of a model of oral self-translation.
the punch lines. The notion of *punch line*, however, is often conflated in the literature with the notion of *joke*, which in turn is often confused with the more restrictive notion of *canned joke*. A brief discussion of the possible definitions of, and distinction between, these concepts is then required.

First of all, the term *joke* in English has two completely different acceptations, as is shown by the definition in the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Attardo 2014):

> The term joke can be found in two different meanings within humor research. The first is that as a type of text; the second is more generally that of an instance of humor. (2014:417)

In the Italian language, these two meanings are expressed by two different words: “battuta” and “barzelletta”. For instance, in the *Enciclopedia dell’Italiano* (Encyclopaedia of the Italian language) published by Treccani, Italy’s most prestigious publisher of encyclopaedias, Bartezzaghi (2010, online) defines “barzelletta” in the following terms:

> La barzelletta è un tipo testuale delimitato da una cornice pragmatica che prevede: un annuncio (del genere: «La sai l’ultima?»); una quota d’interazione partecipativa da parte dell’uditorio, che collabora non interrompendo il narratore, risponde alle eventuali domande previste dalla narrazione, sanziona il finale con la risata; una distinzione netta fra descrizione e narrazione preliminare e la battuta finale (*punch-line*, nella tradizione anglosassone).

[Barzelletta is a type of text delimited by a pragmatic frame that includes: an announcement (for instance: “Do you know the latest?”\(^{41}\)); a certain level of participation from the audience, who collaborate by not interrupting the narrators, answer any question they might ask and mark the end with a laugh; a clear distinction between a preliminary description and narration and the final line (*punch-line*\(^{42}\) in the Anglo-Saxon tradition).] (Bartezzaghi 2010, online, my translation)

So, *barzellette* are identified by the fact that they represent instances of a genre with specific and strict rules, of which the definition just quoted gives only a very general outline. Perrino (2015) also points out the importance of this distinction offered by the Italian language, contrasting *barzelletta* with *battuta*, defined as “a short joking and unexpected response on some conversational topic” (2015:156, note 9), then adding: “I looked at barzellette told during dinners (which bear some similarities to stand-up comedy formats)” (2015:149), without,

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\(^{41}\) “Do you know the latest [joke]?”

\(^{42}\) In English in the original.
however, developing on this supposed similarity. A more formal attempt to distinguish between *barzellette* and other types of “funny stories” is offered by Guagnano (2015), who suggests that the difference consists in the level of explicitness of the script opposition that underlines their humour. This distinction, however, is highly theoretical (it depends on script opposition theory) and does not seem to capture what is most commonly associated with a *barzelletta*. One of these typical aspects is that *barzellette* often represent instances of a joke cycle (for a definition, see for instance Attardo 1996), such as lightbulb jokes, the analysis of which probably offers the best chance of achieving an ostensive definition of the conventions associated with this type of text. This conventionality, in both form and thematic content, is also underlined by Kuipers (2006):

> What happens in a joke generally follows a standard pattern: things often take place three times. There are standard formulas for the telling too: “A man walks into a bar...”; “A Dutchman, a German and a Belgian...” or their American counterparts, “A Polack, an Irishman and...”. Themes, settings, and personages are largely standard as well: a dumb blond, a woman at the doctor’s, a man in a bar, a fly in the soup, three persons on the Eiffel Tower, in an airplane, or on a desert island – all personages and situations the good listener immediately associates with jokes. (2006:5)

Conversely, Yus (2016) remarks that “comedians’ monologues, for instances the ones typically found in performances by David Allen in the UK, [and] Jerry Seinfeld in the USA [...] often lack typical and over-used humorous strategies (apart from the comedians’ skills when deploying them)” (2016:177). Whatever it is that stand-up comedians deliver, then, it is not *barzellette*, since it does not share with the latter the same “standard pattern”.

In English, *barzellette* are often referred to with the expression *canned jokes*, for instance by Martin & Kuiper (1999). Unfortunately, the expression *canned jokes* is sometimes also used in a much more generic sense, to indicate any joke that is *rehearsed*, as opposed to occurring spontaneously in conversation. An example in which the two meanings are mixed and confused is offered by Attardo (2001), who lists among the distinguishing features between canned and conversational jokes both conventional elements of narrative structure, such as “an announcement of the humorous nature of the forthcoming turn” (2001:61), and elements of a more cognitive nature, for instance the fact that these jokes are rehearsed (2001:62).

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43 Although from a perspective more focused on the social implications than on the formal conventions of the text type, this type of analysis is offered by the many studies dedicated to jokes by Christie Davies, for instance Davies (2010) and Davies (2011).
Consequently, Attardo (2001:62) then declares that “a stand-up routine is a highly rehearsed, planned text, which consists in a (sometimes large) part of canned jokes”. Attardo’s definition, however, would lead to the expectation of finding announcements of the humorous intention repeated throughout the stand-up comedy routine, since it would be constituted of canned jokes which, in turn, are characterised by these announcements. Although Attardo himself qualifies the frequency of the production of these announcements of intention at the beginning of a canned joke, as happening “often” (2001:62), not every time one is delivered, there is still a contradiction with the evidence, which instead suggests that these announcements are actually very rare in stand-up comedy. This observation is based on personal experience, both as a performer and an audience member of stand-up comedy, but some independent corroboration can be found in the analysis of show transcripts, for instance those collected in Lee (2010). It is, in fact, the stand-up comedy situation itself that frames the discourse as containing humorous remarks.

There seems to be a gap, then, in the terminology of humour studies: the lack of a term to indicate a joke that, on one hand, does not occur spontaneously in conversation (so it represents a canned joke in the cognitive sense) and, on the other hand, is not an instance of a conventional text type (it is not a barzelletta or canned joke in the formal sense). What both stand-up comedy jokes and canned jokes in the formal sense have in common, however, is that they end in punch lines (the nature of which will be discussed soon). Indeed, the difference between these types of humour context can be identified in the different textual strategies put in place to justify, and prepare for, the delivery of the punch line; in particular, between the strategy of delivering texts that are very conventionally structured, very rigid in form and not open to becoming part of a conversation (if not very scripted and ritualised, as in knock-knock jokes; see for a discussion of ritual repetition in jokes: Norrick 1993) and the alternative strategy, which instead seems to allow for a much wider range of rules and styles (often idiosyncratic to the comedian), for a more fluid form and for a more conversational delivery. However, regardless of these different strategies put in place to prepare for its delivery and reception, the end result is always the punch line. Focusing on punch lines, then, offers the advantage of avoiding the conceptual and terminological quagmire around the notion of joke / canned joke / barzelletta etc. Moreover, it appears consistent with the main concern of the performers. For instance, Davies (2008) notes in relation to canned jokes (in the formal sense):
Most good joke-tellers do not memorize jokes. They simply remember the punchline [sic], the theme of the joke and possibly a particular good jab line and then reinvent the story each time it is told. (2008:160)

Punch lines are arguably, then, the most important part of a mental text that will need to be memorised in declarative memory in the form of sentences. With regard, instead, to the other structural elements of the mental text that constitute the taxonomy proposed in section 2.3 at pp. 24-26, the procedural / declarative classification suggested here can be seen as mostly independent from it. The following is a brief summary of that taxonomy with, for each element, the possible implications for the procedural / declarative distinction:

**Set**

A *set* is a sequence of *routines* and the *links* that connect them. As the all-comprising container of all the textual elements behind a performance, it will inevitably contain both procedural and declarative elements. As has been discussed, the capacity to produce the elements of a set in the right *sequence* can be seen as procedural.

**Routine**

A *routine* is a sequence of interconnected *punch lines*, typically on the same subject, together with the *set ups* required by the rules of the specific comic genre. As discussed above, the punch lines will usually be memorised declaratively, while the set up will either be memorised declaratively or left to the comedian’s procedural skills, according to how important the word-by-word rendition of it is for the comedic effectiveness of the punch line it “feeds”.

**Link**

A *link* is something that connects the routines to each other, often by using clichéd expressions such as: “this reminds me of...”, “the other day...”, “while I was coming here...”, “you will not believe what happened to me today...”. These links can in some cases be memorised declaratively as a specific sentence, or delegated to the comedian’s procedural skill of linking subjects “on the spot”. What is probably most likely to happen is that comedians develop the procedural ability to select on the spot the most effective link from a declarative mnemonic repository of possible choices.

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44 This is derived from self-observation. Further empirical corroboration is suggested for further research.
Punch lines

As discussed above, punch lines represent that part of the mental text that is most likely to be memorised as elements of the declarative (semantic) memory. An investigation of the nature of punch lines, then, becomes of the greatest importance for the understanding of the declarative portion of mental texts. Oring (1989) notes that “[t]he notion of the punch line remains largely intuitive” (1989:351), suggesting a definition from within the framework of an incongruity theory of humour, particularly the script theory proposed by Raskin (1985): “The punch line is a device that triggers the perception of an appropriate incongruity” (Oring 1989:351). Later in the same study, Oring adds that “[a] punch line must stand in the final position” (1989:353), to the point that if this rule is violated “the narrative will tend to be conceptualized less a joke and more as a form as a form of humorous tale” (ibid.). In other words, the problem seems, again, to consist in the semantic confusion about the meaning of the word joke: Oring seems to identify jokes with canned jokes in the formal sense (barzellette), using instead humorous tales for instances of (still non-spontaneous, we can assume) humour discourse that do not fall within this strict definition (Attardo, 2001:82). Going back to the discussion about the position of punch lines, Attardo (1996) accepts the restriction of punch lines to the final position of a canned joke and, consequently, feels the need to introduce the concept of jab lines (1996:91), specifying elsewhere that “[j]ab lines differ from punch lines in that they may occur in any other position in the text” (Attardo, 2001:82). The need to introduce this distinction, however, appears to be the result of the enforced superimposition on all humorous texts of the narrative conventions associated with canned jokes in the stricter sense. It is only, in fact, as an effect of considering stand-up comedy as composed of a sequence of texts identifiable by their highly conventional and recognisable structure that the distinction between punch lines at the end of them and punch lines that occur in any other position, for instance jab lines, can make some sense. If, instead, we abandon the idea of the text of stand-up comedy as composed by a sequence of conventionally structured jokes, this distinction disappears, since recognising smaller units of text (of which these lines are, or are not, supposed to be at the end) becomes impossible.

45 An in-depth analysis and classification of the different devices by means of which punch lines trigger this effect is offered by Hetzron (1991).
46 Oring’s term “humorous tale”, then, seems to fill the terminological gap in Humour Studies that was highlighted above. It does not, however, seems to have been widely adapted. Moreover, it seems to suggest a narrative element that it is not always present. For instance, Jimmy Carr-style one liners are neither formal canned jokes nor are they spontaneous, so they would be “humorous tales” if we accepted this term to express that type of jokes, but it is clear that calling them “tales” would sound highly unnatural.
On the other hand, rejecting the idea that stand-up comedy sets are constituted by a sequence of canned jokes does not mean that it is not possible to recognise any constituting parts within a comedy text. In the alternative structural model suggested in this study, however, these smaller parts are not the canned jokes, but the routines, the boundaries of which are represented by the links between them. The position of the punch line with regard to these units, then, becomes totally irrelevant. For this reason, the concept of jab line is not used in the present study, while the concept of punch line is used regardless of any consideration of their position within the text. Conversely, it is the notion of joke that can be defined as “the text between two punch lines”, as was suggested in section 2.3 at p.25. If this is the case, then the positional criterion does not disappear completely (if jokes are defined as what is between punch lines, punch lines end up at the end of them, after all), but loses its centrality, since it is not used as the criterion to identify the punch lines. Instead, I propose that the alternative identification criterion for punch lines should be found in the intention of their production: the punch line is the part of text that comedians produce with the intention of producing a humorous response (the nature of which will be discussed below). In other words, it is the joke that now becomes relative to the punch line (defined in intentional, not positional, terms) and defined by its position in relation to it. By making joke a derived notion, instead of a primitive one, the theoretical and terminological confusion surrounding it can be avoided.

A possible difficulty with this approach is that, from the point of view of an external observer, the intention behind an act is usually reconstructed from its results, so, if punch lines are defined by the intention associated to them, they will be recognised as such only by observing the audience response. This poses the problem of how to recognise a failed punch line, a problem that in turn has consequences for translation, because the recognition of failed punch lines plays an important role in this activity, as will soon be discussed. Fortunately, the present study focuses on the phenomenon of self-translation, in which an introspective access to somebody’s own intentions can be reasonably assumed. From the point of view, instead, of the researcher on self-translation, this consideration can be seen as another reminder of the importance for this study of the phenomenological approach (as discussed in Chapter 3), by means of which these intentions can be reconstructed by the researcher with the help of the participants themselves.

So far, the discussion has focused on content stored in declarative / semantic memory. That content stored in declarative / episodic memory is also involved in stand-up comedy was
pointed out by Molineux (2016) and can be corroborated by the interviews collected in this study, which can also shed some light on what happens to this content in translation. For example, in the following passage Puma responds to my question on her discovery of stand-up comedy:

GP – […] I remember you playing that character the very first time I saw you performing. In the same night, however, you also performed a piece about your experience working in an Italian restaurant in London. That one was as yourself, not as a character, right?

RP – Yes and the funny bit is that it was a piece I had written in five minutes! What happened is that, by sheer chance, I ended up watching a stand-up comedy night, in a club somewhere near the Barbican Centre in London. On the bill there was a female comedian who talked about the experience of giving birth. For me it was a revelation: it was a way of doing comedy that was completely different from what I had seen before. I found it so inspiring that I went home and I wrote my restaurant piece straight away. It’s from that moment that I stared moving towards stand-up comedy. (RP:501-510)

In this passage, Puma reports two different, but related discoveries. First, she discovers that she can perform as herself, as opposed to playing a character. In turn, this allows her to access her episodic memory as a source of material. This is the reason why she had the possibility, for the first time, to write an entire routine “in five minutes”: she only had to write some mnemonic bookmarks to some content which was already available to her as part of her autobiographic memory. When moving to the bilingual perspective in the next section, the implication of this for translation will also be discussed.

4.3 Moving to the bilingual perspective: a model for the translation of the mental text of stand-up comedy

In the previous section, the discussion of the content of the mental text of stand-up comedy has identified the punch lines as the most important constituents that are memorised declaratively. At the same time, the importance of episodic memory was also recognised. The present section is dedicated to the implications of this way of describing the contents of stand-up comedy for a

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47 It might be argued that characters are also developed from someone’s autobiographical background, in the sense in which is sometimes said that all writing is autobiographical. Although this might indeed be the case, it is also clear that, in developing a character, autobiographical material goes through a process of transformation, to the point that recognising the biographical source might require, for an observer, a significant research effort.
theoretical account of its translation. In doing so, the discussion will take as its starting point the point of arrival of the previous section, i.e. episodic memory.

In section 4.1, two passages (at p.74 and at p.75) were quoted from the interview with Romina Puma, in which she recounts how, when she started doing comedy in English, she had to “memorise every single word” (RM:15), while, with reference to a later phase in the development of her competence as performer in English, she declares: “My routine about going to the gym is indicated, in the ‘script’, by the word ‘gym’ only, I know where to go from there” (RP:553-554). Puma does not specify whether this gym-based routine, which can now be recognised as stored in episodic memory, is the product of translation from Italian or of new writing in English. This omission, however, can be revealing in itself. One way of interpreting it is that, while Puma, in the early stage of her development as an English speaker, when she still did not have the confidence to do otherwise, had to perform a conscious effort to translate episodic memory-stored routines into English (probably by way of a previous verbalisation into Italian), in the later phase this was not needed any longer. What Puma seems to be doing at this later stage is, instead, a different type of “translation”: that of translating (more technically, verbalising) some content stored in episodic memory into some verbal content directly into the language of performance, which is the type of “translation” that always happens when we tell an autobiographical story, regardless of whether we are speaking our first or second language. Of course, this reconstruction is based on the assumption that episodic memory is in itself language-independent. The issue is widely debated in the literature, but even authors who have stressed the importance of language for episodic memory, for instance Marian & Neisser (2000), have done so by stressing the importance of the choice of language for the recall of a specific episode. After all, if the episode itself was stored in a language-specific form, its content would be propositional48, so the distinction between episodic memory and semantic memory would disappear and episodic memory would just become that part of semantic memory in which propositions describe episodes. Going back to Puma, when she did not trust her English enough she had to “semanticise” her episodic content in English on the page, before delivering that content on stage. Later, she was able to do so directly on the stage. In either case, there was no translation in the stricter, translingual sense, unless, in the first case, she had to verbalise the episodic content into Italian first and then perform a translation of this content into English. There is, however, no evidence in the interview to suggest that this was the case. More generally speaking, however, it might be the case that this need is associated with an even

48 Or, better, sentential; see above for a discussion of the distinction.
lower level of linguistic competence. So, there would be three different stages in the linguistic development with regard to the need to translate episodic contents: 1) a stage that requires the verbalisation of episodic content into the first / dominant language, followed by translation of this verbalised content; 2) a stage that requires the verbalisation of the episode prior to the performance but directly in the target language, without translation; 3) a stage that allows for the verbalisation of the episodic content in the target language directly in performance.

What matters for the present discussion is that episodic contents are, then, unlikely to be the object of conscious interlingual translation efforts. Even if they might be in some cases, it is clear that they do not need to be necessarily so. It will, then, be suggested that it is the (conscious and precedent to the performance) translation of the declarative / semantic content, in the previous section identified as composed at least and most importantly by the punch lines, which represents the main task involved in the oral self-translation of stand-up comedy. It is, in fact, one of the defining characteristics of declarative memory that “at least part of this knowledge can be consciously (‘explicitly’) recollected” (Ullman 2004:235). Indeed, the empirical evidence collected in this study is consistent with the suggestion that at least a portion of the translation effort happens consciously and is performed on consciously recalled material, as was shown above with specific reference to the experience of Antonello Taurino and Giada Garofalo. If this is the case, the source of this conscious activity will need to be constituted by the part of memory that is available to conscious recollection, i.e. declarative memory. Having, then, identified in the punch lines the minimal, and functionally most important, constituents of the declarative content of the mental text of stand-up comedy, the conclusion is that punch lines will also constitute the main focus of these conscious translation activities.

In order to gain a better understanding of how this might happen, a theoretical model of the different phases involved in this process will now be suggested. Some help in this direction can be found in the notion of the mental model developed by Johnson-Laird (1983). According to Johnson-Laird, discourse comprehension, and understanding in general, consists in deriving from it a mental model of some state of affairs. In his own words:

The psychological core of understanding, I shall assume, consists in your having a ‘working model’ of the phenomenon in your mind. If you understand inflation, a mathematical proof, the way a computer works, DNA or a divorce, then you have a mental representation that serves as a model for an entity in much the same way as, say, a clock functions as a model for the earth’s rotation. (Johnson-Laird 1983:2)
To understand how this notion can be applied to the understanding of discourse situations, such as translation, a detour on *propositional attitudes reports* is required. When discussing how this type of semantics can be applied to propositional attitudes (1983:430-438), such as beliefs, Johnson-Laird suggests that a “propositional attitude is a relation between an individual and that individual’s mental model of the relevant state of affairs” (1983:433). To understand a propositional attitude report (the attribution, in discourse, of a propositional attitude to someone) such as “X believes that snow is white”, we first construct a mental model representing the state of affairs “Snow is white”, then we construct a mental representation of the believer “X”, and finally we construct a mental representation of the relation of believing directed towards that mental model. In other words, we need to *embed* the mental model of the state affairs expressed by the proposition $P$ into a mental model of the relation towards it, i.e. of $X$ believes that $P$. More generally speaking, propositional attitudes reports are described in this theory through the idea of the *embedding* of mental models (Ibid.).

A similar embedding can be hypothesised in those situations in which the goal is not only the understanding of “what is said”, but of the discourse situation itself. According to Setton (1999), for instance, this is what happens in simultaneous interpreting. Indeed, applying to this situation the theoretical idiom of mental models, Setton (1999) suggests that the interpreter constructs a mental representation not only of the speaker(s), but also of the audience, of their utterances and of the effect that the speakers are understood to want to produce on their audience by means of these utterances. If the speaker, in other words, is saying “Snow is white”, the simultaneous interpreter will produce a mental model that includes not only the (embedded) mental model representing snow being white, but also the (embedding) mental model of the speaker’s intentions in producing such utterance, which also requires a representation of the audience. According to Jongste (2016), the attribution of mental models to speakers also plays a fundamental role in humour. Indeed, Jongste offers an explanation of the recognition of the speaker’s humorous intent based on the perception of a shift between the mental model publicly expressed by the speaker and the audience’s reconstruction of what Jongste calls his/her “private mental model” (2016:108). For instance, in Jongste’s example (2016:111), when comedian Eddie Izzard pretends (publicly) to believe that the humming sounds of Star Wars derive from Gregorian chant, which the audience know it is unlikely to be a (privately) held belief.

While constructing the mental model of comedic discourse, however, the comedian is not only concerned with the perception of his humorous intent, but also with the conditions of its
success. In order to understand better what might be involved in the construction of the model of a discourse situation, it is useful to point out that, according to Johnson-Laird, “the mental model is constructed on the basis of truth conditions of the propositions expressed by the sentences in the discourse” (Johnson-Laird 1983:407). This application of the concept of truth conditions, however, seems to be problematic in the case of those propositions that Searle (1969), building on Austin (1962), called speech acts, for instance commands: in this case, what is said cannot be evaluated as being true (or false), so specifying the conditions for this to happen appears impossible. Singh (1993) suggests that this problem would be resolved by identifying the semantics of speech acts not with its truth conditions, but with its satisfaction conditions, defined as “the conditions under which we would affirm that the given speech act had been satisfied, e.g. a command is satisfied if it is obeyed and a promise is satisfied when it is kept” (1993:49). The mental model associated with an utterance of the command “bring me a glass of water” will, then, be the model of its satisfaction: the mental representation of the desired act of the receiver bringing a glass of water to the speaker.

If instances of comic discourse can be represented as speech acts, it will equally be possible to suggest a theory of comic discourse in terms of the mental models that represent the conditions of their satisfaction. Raskin (1985), for one, briefly discusses considering jokes as speech acts, conceding that “[i]t is not too difficult to propose a definition of the speech act of making a joke” (1985:328) and rejecting the approach as “reductionist” (Ibid.). Raskin’s concern seems to be based on the risk of giving too much importance to the illocutionary aspect of jokes, and humorous texts in general, at the expense of an understanding of their content. This legitimate concern, on the other hand, should not result into the opposite error of forgetting the importance, for the production of comic discourse, of those illocutionary aspects, particularly of the intention to obtain a specific reaction in the audience.

In light of these requirements and concerns, the theoretical idiom of propositional attitudes and/or sentential attitudes, in combination with the notion of mental models, can be seen as even more promising for a theory of comic discourse than the idiom of speech acts itself. While, in fact, understanding the satisfaction conditions of “bring me a glass of water” can be relatively easy, defining the satisfaction conditions of an act of comic discourse is more problematic. The most natural suggestion would be to identify these conditions with the production of laughter in the audience. However, not only is laughter a very heterogeneous phenomenon (see for instance: Chafe 2007), but also the satisfaction conditions of jokes are not limited to the production of laughter, but might also include smiling, frowning or even recoiling in
(paradoxically amusing) kind of horror. In other words, the complexity of the desired response associated with comic discourse would make every definition in purely behavioural terms as reductionist as Raskin feared.

The same, however, cannot be said with regard to a description in terms of propositional or, better still (taking into consideration the discussion above of the importance of storing in memory the surface structure sentences, not only their meaning), of sentential attitudes: comedy discourse, in these terms, can be seen as constituted by – among other things, but with specific importance – a set of sentences “S” (the punch lines) delivered with the intentions of producing in the recipient “X” a specific attitude towards them: the attitude “X finds S funny”.

The task of understanding what this finding S funny sentential attitude actually means and entails, in other words what people find funny and why, is probably the ultimate goal of the entire field of humour research. As such, in the present context this sentential attitude will need to be proposed as an undefined element of the theory outlined here.

Applying this notion of a mental model (more specifically, of a situation model of the discourse, which includes the representation of the desired propositional / sentential attitude in the audience), the following theoretical model of what happens in oral self-translation of stand-up comedy can be proposed.

First, the comedian / translator produces a mental model representing the sentences in the source language, their intended (and/or, as will soon be clarified, actual) audience and the finding S funny attitude of these audiences towards them. This is usually based on actual performances, so, along with the semantic memory required to store the sentences themselves, this mental representation will also involve the episodic memory of the reactions to them from specific audiences in specific performance situations. It is, however, also usually the case that the same sentences had been delivered (although still in the same language) in front of different audiences and in different situations, typically with different results. While based on episodic memory of actual reactions, then, this mental model will arguably also require a certain level of generalisation.

Secondly, the comedian / translator produces a mental model of a discourse situation in which the source language is replaced with the target language and the (remembered and/or

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49 Incidentally, the definition of the punch line in terms of intention proposed above will also need to take this complexity into account. The intention associated with punch lines, then, is not necessarily the production of laughter, but more generally the production of a humorous response. In turn, this response can be described in terms of the sentential attitude “finding S funny” proposed below.
generalised) source audience is replaced with the anticipated target audience. At this stage, for each relevant sentence, i.e. (at least) for each punch line, the comedian/translator produces a mental translation of the sentence into the target language and runs the model in order to predict whether each candidate translation is likely to produce the desired finding S funny sentential attitude towards it for the anticipated target audience. Indeed, as Johnson-Laird (1983) suggested, the possibility of prediction is the greatest advantage offered by mental models. If the prediction does not produce the satisfied result in this mental simulation, for example because the cultural reference used in the punch line is likely to be unknown to the target audience, a better candidate translation is produced and mentally tested.

In the next phase, the translated text is tried out in front of an actual audience and the response is fed back into the model used for future translations, which at this point (just like the model for the source text) will also partly rely on memory and experience, not only on prediction. The translations that did not work will be revised and these modified versions will be played “in the theatre of the mind” in search of a better translation, until they are also tested in front of a real audience. If the new translations succeed this time in producing the desired response, they are kept, otherwise the cycle is repeated, until either a successful translation is found, or the sentence is declared “untranslatable” and dropped from the target text. This judgement of untranslatability, however, might happen a priori, before any actual translation is attempted, because of some generalised principle that the comedian / translator has derived from past experience. This seems to be the case, for instance, of puns and other forms of wordplay, as shown in this passage from the interview with Antonello Taurino:

I don’t do much of it [wordplay] in English, since most of my material is a translation from the Italian, so the jokes based on wordplay don’t pass through the translation filter. (AT:1157-1158).

Katsura Sunshine, who translates from Japanese into English, is even more drastic with regard to this a priori exclusion:

There are some stories based on wordplay and I simply don’t do them when I perform in English, it would be like beating your head against the wall and there is

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50 This mental simulation in front of a projected audience is probably a feature of writing for performance in general, not only of translating. It is quite common, for instance, to hear a comedian commenting on the failure of some new material to produce the desired reaction by adding: “Strange, that worked in my mind”.

51 This is an instance of what the literature on plans calls a Test-Operate-Test-Exit, or TOTE, plan. See for instance: Miller (1960:27).
no need to do that, with so many stories to choose from. I just pick stories that don’t pose that kind of problem. (KS: 1508-1510)

Moreover, this is how Taurino describes the process of choosing what material to perform in New York:

I took all the material I had written up to then and I went through it with the question: “What can work in New York?” Well, I didn’t know that, I only knew what was likely not to work there. (AT: 1108-1110)

The process of proceeding by exclusion, then, is not limited to wordplay, but can be seen as a more general strategy, particularly in those cases, such as that of Taurino, in which material is mostly developed in the dominant language and translated into the less dominant one.

4.4 Conclusions

The statistician George E.P. Box once said that “all models are wrong, but some are useful” (Box & Draper 1987:424). The notion of mental text, and the related notion of oral self-translation from a mental text, brings with it a sense of opacity to direct observation that calls for a modelling effort in theoretical, sometimes abstract, terms. In the previous sections, an eclectic theoretical apparatus borrowed from the fields of cognitive science, psycholinguistics and philosophy of language has been used to produce such an effort. The result is an idea of mental text based on a combination of declarative memory (can be expressed in words and recalled consciously) and procedural memory (skills that are unconsciously redeployed performance after performance), with the declarative part considered essential to translation and constituted, most importantly, by the punch lines. Secondly, a theoretical model of its translation was suggested, based on the notion of a mental model that represents the – predicted first, actual later – comic efficacy of these sentences. In turn, this comic efficacy was defined as the ability to produce in the audience, for each sentence S, the sentential attitude finding S funny.

Given the mental nature of some of these phenomena, introspection has represented the main source for this theoretical effort. The evidence collected in the empirical part of this research, however, seems to be consistent with it. For example, the phenomenological evidence on the conscious nature of translation goes hand in hand with the attribution to declarative memory of some elements of the mental text. Conversely, the recognition that some parts of it are not “scripted” (but not totally spontaneous either) is consistent with attributing other elements to
procedural memory. The same can be said for the specific importance attributed to punch lines.
The hope, then, is that these two theoretical models might be useful, in E.P. Box’s sense, to
capture, on one side, the complex (both fluid and granting a certain level of predictability)
nature of the mental text and, on the other, the iterative and open-ended nature of its oral self-
translation. In order, however, to gain an understanding of what this activity might actually
entail for its own participants, this study needs now to proceed towards more empirically sound
grounds, where specific translation challenges can be observed and their perceived success or
failure discussed. This will be the aim of the next chapter.
In the previous chapters, the theoretical implications as well as challenges of oral self-translation of stand-up comedy were investigated for the theoretical challenges they pose. In this chapter, the focus will move to the experience of translation itself, as is described in the interviews collected. First, the question of whether oral self-translation of stand-up occurs at all, and to what extent, will be investigated. Secondly, the source and the directionality of the translation will also be discussed. Thirdly, specific challenges to the comic effectiveness of the translation (wordplay, rhythm, word order, culture-specificity) will be explored, along with the available compensation strategies as detailed by the participants. Finally, some generalisations will be attempted with regard to the problem of humour translatability in the light of the discussion of these challenges and strategies, but also in the light of the comic effectiveness of these translation efforts as perceived by the participants.

### 5.1 Occurrence and extent of translation

In section 2.5, a definition of translation that could be applied to the specific case of oral self-translation was proposed (p. 48). In brief, this consisted of applying the idea of *assumed translation*, while specifying that the assumption, in this case, can only be made by the (putative) translators themselves. Under this definition, there is clear evidence for the occurrence of translation activities among bilingual comedians. Indeed, all the comedians interviewed for this study declared that they had performed some translation of material or, in other words, that they did something they had experienced and reconstructed as translation. Even Giada Garofalo, who initially seemed to reject the idea of translation, admitted to it soon afterwards:

GG – [...] My notes, in fact, are often written in both languages. Then, of course, it will happen that I deliver that material in a language first and then in the other. What I do, in that case, is not that I translate it, but that I rethink it.

GP – Well, you don’t rethink it from scratch, right?

GG – No, of course I start from something, what I don’t do is start again from the script, I don’t translate the “original” script. Sometimes I improvise the translation directly on the stage. (GG:79-86)
Her initial rejection of translation, then, seemed to have been motivated by an interpretation of translation as limited to written texts. The prompt allowed her, instead, to focus on the fact that, although she did not start from a written script, she did start from “something”. In this new light, the interpretation of her activity as translation became possible. What was suggested, then, was not the assumption of translation, but the possibility of rethinking translation as something having a source, even if not a written source. The recognition of the presence of a source of some kind then allowed Garofalo to recognise that this source was indeed the source in a transfer, so that a transfer might have occurred. The crucial point, however, is that even the re-interpreted prediction of translation was still, to use Popper’s term, falsifiable: my suggestion that she did not “start from scratch” (derived from my own experience, which is always an element present in the interviews, which are, in a sense, a dialogue between two set of interpreted experiences, as discussed in Chapter 3) could have been rejected by Garofalo, or accepted only tentatively. Instead, not only she confirmed it in the strongest terms (“of course I start from something”), but this allowed her to talk of “translation”, now recognised as a transfer from a source (of some kind), instead of a transfer from a (necessarily) written source. All the participants interviewed, moreover, were able to reconstruct their translation process, and hence to describe it as such, although to different levels of detail and depth. In the case of Antonello Taurino, the reconstruction was particularly detailed, given that written translation notes were available and that I had been involved in the process as a translation consultant (see Appendix A.4.1). On the contrary, in the case of Magnus Bertnér and Katsura Sunshine, I did not have the linguistic competence needed to know in advance whether they translated material between English and their other language (native Swedish and non-native Japanese respectively). They were selected for this study as bilingual comedians, not as putative translators. Both, however, declared, just like the other participants, that they had translated material between the two languages.

Evidence, then, seems to suggest very clearly that bilingual comedians do perform translation of material between the languages in which they perform. This does not mean, however, that they translate all their material. On the contrary, many participants stressed the importance of the selection of what material to translate, mostly by a process of exclusion of what is perceived by the comedian as not likely to work for the target language / culture (AT: 1157:1162; MB: 1697:1706; FD: 1959). For instance, here is what Antonello Taurino says about his first translation into English:
I took all the material I had written up to then and I went through it with the question: “What can work in New York?” Well, I didn’t know that, I only knew what was likely not to work there. (AT:1108-1110)

What seems to be happening, then, is an implicit classification of the jokes / punch lines according to their transferability to the target language / culture. In order to make that classification explicit, it can be useful to refer to the theoretical classifications of humour translatability that have been proposed in the literature by, among others, Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1994; 1996; 2005), Vandaele (2010) and Yus (2016), which will be discussed in order of increasing complexity. First, Vandaele (2010) proposes a dichotomic classification, stating that “[t]he relative or absolute untranslatability is generally related to cultural and linguistic aspects” (2010:149). This classification, although still in need of further specification, focuses on the reasons behind the challenges to translation. On the contrary, Yus (2016) offers a classification between transferable, replaceable and challenging jokes (2016:246-247). The focus here is on the transferability itself, not on its reasons, so an application of this model to the translation decisions discussed in this study would prove to be rather tautological. Comedians would, above all, decide to transfer the material they would consider transferable. Instead, Zabalbeascoa’s classification is, like that proposed by Vandaele, based on the reasons behind the different grades of difficulty posed by humour translation and is also more fine-graded. Zabalbeascoa distinguishes between international jokes (they do not play on language and do not contain culture-specific references), national-cultural-and-institutions jokes (they contain culture-specific references), national sense of humour jokes (more on which later), language dependent jokes (based on language-specific wordplay), visual jokes and complex jokes, which combine more types (1994:97). These joke types can be mapped to the different decisions with regard to what parts of comedy material are transferred across languages by the participants to our study: the international punch lines\textsuperscript{52} are transferred without adaptation, the national-cultural-and-institutions are either successfully adapted, converted to international or dropped after a failed adaptation attempt (the topic of culture-specificity will be further discussed in section 5.7, at pp. 122-126), while language dependent ones are generally excluded from the start (see sections 5.5, at pp. 114-118, and 5.6, at pp. 118-122.).

With regard to the national-sense-of-humour type of joke, Zabalbeascoa admits that “[t]his category still needs a lot of research, and is probably the most controversial one” (1993:302).

\textsuperscript{52} In the present study, the focus is not on jokes but on punch lines, for reasons explained in section 4.2, particularly at pp. 82-90. Zabalbeascoa’s classification, however, can equally be read as a classification of punch lines.
One attempt to fill the gap is the collection of essays entitled *National styles of humor* (Ziv 1988), a term, *national style*, which is preferable to *national sense* in that it avoids possible confusion due to the psychological connotations of the latter. Indeed, it is on this confusion that popular generalisations such as “the Germans do not have a sense of humour” seem to be based: the supposed lack of a faculty or skill is inferred from what is more probably a different function played by humour in society. The importance of this latter aspect is, indeed, stressed by Ziv (1988) in the introduction. After identifying the *aspects of humour as techniques, content and situation* (1988:iix), Ziv writes:

At the present state of knowledge, theoretically one can see these aspects of humor on a continuum from universal to cultural. On this continuum techniques should be considered as most universal. There is no society in which humor has not been reported to exist. In all anthropological research in which cultures have been compared, the techniques of humor have been found to be the same. Incongruity, surprise, and local logic (i.e., something that seems logical in a certain context) are the main elements in all humor. These are cognitive elements, and since cognitive processes are universal (as are the physiological ones involved in laughter and smiling), there are no reasons to expect national or cultural differences. […] Probably societies differ most in the situations in which humor is used and considered appropriate (1988:iix-x).

For *situation* it is important to mean in this context not only the situation in which the enunciation takes place (for instance, a comedy club), but also the situation to which the enunciation refers to, i.e. the domain of discourse to which humour is applied (for instance, disability). The transfer of content from a comedy club situation in Britain to a comedy club situation in Italy might appear as a transfer between two situations in which humour is most obviously appropriate. However, using these situations in order to produce humour about disability, in the example mentioned above, might not be equally acceptable. If this is the case, then the decision that the self-translating comedian will need to make with regard to a punch line they perceive as strongly associated with a *national-sense-of-humour* is whether to include it or exclude it from the translated set. It is not a decision on whether the joke “travels well”, but more on whether it travels at all, on whether it has the necessary visa, so to speak, to enter the target culture as a legitimate instance of humour. Most material, however, does seem to be allowed to travel, with considerations of relevance and relatability (*national-cultural-and-

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53 The specific case of disability will be discussed in section 6.4, with reference to Romina Puma’s experience, reported in her interview. However, that case makes it also clear that the same national culture might be the host to different comedy scenes (on which more in section 5.9), each associated with the preference for a different comedy style.
institutions-related material, in Zabalbeascoa’s terminology) playing a more prominent role than acceptability in the choice of what to translate. For instance, Swedish comedian Magnus Bertnér reports:

The material I write here in England usually works in Sweden too, while most of the stuff I talk about in Sweden wouldn’t make any sense to people here. For instance, Swedish politics is of no interest to people here, while UK politics might be of some interest for a Swedish audience, provided, of course, that you limit yourself to the main figures and events. Apart from that qualification, I do have a lot of material that is the same in both languages (MB:1631:1635)

In conclusion to this section, when comedians perform in more than one language, translation does seem to occur between them, particularly with regard to those parts of material that are considered as not requiring any adaptation; other parts of material are chosen for translation despite the need for adaptation; finally, others are excluded, either because they are too dependent on language or because their topic is not considered appropriate for humour in the target culture.

5.2 The source text of the translation

In the passage from Giada Garofalo quoted above, Garofalo pointed out very clearly: “of course I start from something, what I don’t do is starting again from the script, I don’t translate the ‘original’ script” (GG:84–85). Moreover, as is shown in Appendix A.1.1, her preparatory notes are bilingual, in the sense that they contain parts written in Italian and parts written in English, even if each performance is then delivered in one language only. This being the case, two different types of translation can be identified as taking place. Firstly, there is the translation between the bilingual notes and the monolingual mental text in the language chosen for the first performance, in the first language. Secondly, there is the translation between this mental text and the mental text that will enable the performances in the target language. The reason why it is not the case that the notes themselves should be considered the source of this second translation is that, after the first performances, they soon become stale. Comedy material is usually edited and developed “on stage”, so, unless the comedian has the discipline to always keep the written notes up to date with the oral developments (which, from my personal experience and anecdotal evidence from other comedians, does not seem to happen), these notes will soon be out of sync with the oral development of the material. This is confirmed by
Giada Garofalo herself, when she discusses the origins of her show for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2013:

GP – It is written as if to be performed word-by-word. Did you follow it word-by-word in the performance too?

GG – Not at all, for instance there are entire chunks of it that I actually never performed. Other parts were changed, without me updating the written script accordingly.

GP – What if you were asked to translate the show into Italian? Would you also write it word-by-word in the Italian version?

GG – No, maybe two years ago, but not now.

GP – What would the starting point be, then? The show how you developed it in the meantime?

GG – Yes, of course, there would be no point in “going backwards”. (GG:237-246)

Other participants, such as Romina Puma, declared that they have a written script in the dominant language, but that they need to “write things down” when translating to the less dominant language, as was discussed in section in section 4.1, where (at p. 74) the relevant passage from her interview was quoted. Puma too, then, is (in a sense) performing two translations at the same time, since a mental text (flexible, open to improvisation etc.) in Italian is translated into a written text (memorised word-by-word) in English, although, of course, both texts are then delivered orally during the performances. In the phase of Puma’s development as a bilingual comedian when she had to “memorise every single word, as we used to do at school with those poems by Giacomo Leopardi” (RM:15-16), she was, in fact, still performing orally, but the limitations in her linguistic competence forced her to perform a translation from the mental text (in Honko’s sense) behind her oral Italian performances to the fully written text (although temporally stored in her mind, so to speak, before and during the performances themselves) required for her first performances in English. As discussed in section 2.2, at pp. 15-16, a similar phenomenon has been reconstructed as happening during the first period of residence of the Italian Commedia dell’arte performers in Paris in the 17th century and in that case too it seems

54 Which, in their case, also happens to be the main source language of translation, see next paragraph for a discussion of the role of linguistic competence in choosing the direction in which to perform the translation.
to be correlated with weak linguistic competence in the target language. However, while doing what she feels she cannot avoid doing, Puma is conscious of the dangers posed by this “going scripted”. A stand-up comedian, in fact, needs the freedom to adapt to contingencies, such as a hypothetical interruption from a heckler. Stand-up comedy, in other words, is seen by its practisers as an essentially oral form and the need to “go scripted”, imposed by the translation into a language in which the comedians is less competent, is recognised as a potential risk for its success.

Linguistic competence, however, changes with time, and both in the case of Romina Puma and in the historical precedent represented by the Commedia dell’arte performers in Paris there is some evidence suggesting that an increase in linguistic competence might be correlated with an increase in the “orality” of the bilingual transfer\(^{55}\). Indeed, when describing the writing process for her Edinburgh Fringe 2015 show, Puma explains (in a passage already discussed in other sections):

> [...] some pieces are born in Italian since they are born for the London Puma, but actually other pieces are written in English, although they are first tried out in Italian. I don’t need to write down the Italian version, though, I just keep it in my mind. But I’m now at a stage of my development as a performer in English sometimes I don’t feel the need to write word-by-word the English set either. My routine about going to the gym is indicated, in the “script”, by the word “gym” only. I know where to go from there. (RP:549-554)

In conclusion to this section, the evidence collected in this study seems to confirm that self-translation of stand-up is indeed a case of oral translation, in which the source is not represented by a written text, even when it might involve written scripts or notes as preparatory tools. Indeed, one of the reasons why the concept of mental text as described in Chapter 3 can be useful to research is that it shifts the focus from a notion of orality which applies to the modality of the delivery to one that is more concerned with the modality of the production. In other words, it offers a way to distinguish between the two very different phenomena of an actor who delivers a poem learned by heart, on one hand, and the partly improvised and always slightly varied performance of a stand-up comedians, on the other. Indeed, both performances are orally delivered, but the source of the first oral production is a (memorised) written text, while the source of the second is a mental text as described in

\(^{55}\) For a discussion of the evidence for this happening in the historical case, see section 2.2, particularly pp.14-16.
Chapter 3, i.e. including elements which, being procedural in nature, cannot even be expressed by means of a written text, let alone be derived from it.

5.3 The direction(s) of the translation

Language directionality of translation, the evidence suggests, also seems to be correlated with linguistic competence. An example is offered by this passage from the interview with Luca Cupani, who, at the moment of the interview, had been living in the UK for less than one year:

GP – Do you ever translate between the two languages?

LC – Almost never from Italian into English, because, as I was saying, my Italian is much richer than my English, so many nuances would be lost. Moreover, my Italian material is usually developed at the London Puma so it is very Italy-centric. Sometimes I do the opposite, though: I translate into Italian material originally developed in English. For me it’s like changing the resolution of an image: you can decrease the resolution, but you can never increase it. (LC:754-759)

Another important factor, which seems to “override” in importance even linguistic competence, is the country of residence of the comedian which, in turns, determines in what language they have the most frequent chances to perform their material. This factor is exemplified by the case of Antonello Taurino, who lives in Italy and only performs in English when visiting English-speaking countries. His competence in English is weaker than Cupani’s, but the fact that he usually performs in Italian seems to limit his options on the directionality of his translations, since most of his material will inevitably be developed in Italian first. The result is a limitation to directionality that is the opposite of what is experienced by Cupani, i.e. Taurino’s translation is mainly limited to the Italian-into-English direction. In the following passage Taurino describes this forced dominance in the directionality of his translation, although admitting at the same time that transfers in the opposite directions do exceptionally occur:

[…] my difficulties with English can be an advantage, because it means that I need to work hard on editing and selecting my material in English. So, my English material tends to be sparse, but better selected and edited than my Italian one.

GP – Is all your English material a selection from the Italian? Did you ever develop jokes directly in English?

AT – Yes, usually in the case of observations made abroad. Here in London, for instance, I performed this joke: “It’s easy to recognise Italians in London: they are
those that they are wearing sunglasses even when it’s cloudy”. I then did it in Italy and I discovered that it works there too, so I guess this is a case of translation in the opposite direction.

GP – What about wordplay?

AT – I don’t do much of it in English, since most of my material is a translation from the Italian, so the jokes based on wordplay don’t pass through the translation filter. In Italian, instead, I do some wordplay, even in my theatre shows, in a supposedly “noble” context, so in a context where you shouldn’t find them. (AT:1130:1144)

At the other extreme of the spectrum of linguistic competence in the second language and of opportunities to perform in the second language, we seem to encounter, instead, an almost perfect bidirectionality of translation. The case is exemplified by Giada Garofalo, who at the time of the interview had been living in the UK for more than 13 years. In sharp contrast with Taurino’s experience, for the first four years of her six years of experience as a comedian she suffered from a lack of opportunities to perform in her native Italian, as it is shown by this extract from her interview:

GP – And how about the passage to doing comedy in Italian? How and when did it happen?

GG – It happened by chance, actually it happened thanks to you, who introduced me to the London Puma. Before that, I didn’t have any opportunity to perform in Italian here in England and in Italy, until a few years ago, there wasn’t much of a stand-up scene. (GG:42-45)

Not only, but her lack of experience of the Italian comedy scene even extends to watching it:

GP – Speaking of the Italian comedy scene, have you ever performed in Italy?

GG – No, I haven’t, but I would like to.

GP – What are your expectations and concerns?

GG - I have no idea of what to expect, since I have never attended live comedy in Italy. (GG:181-184)
Unsurprisingly, then, until Garofalo discovered the possibility of performing comedy in Italian in London, she only developed material in English. Since she started doing comedy in Italian too, however, her own writing itself became bilingual, as was anticipated in the previous paragraph and as she explains as follows:

[…] if I write something that is related to my experience in London, it comes natural to me to write it in English. If, instead, my train of thoughts originates from an experience I had in Italy, then automatically I start writing in Italian. Often, however, I start writing in a language, then I have to use a word or a sentence in English and, after that, I automatically do the... how do you say “switch” in Italian? My notes, in fact, are often written in both languages. (GG:73-78)

The interview was originally conducted in Italian – as illustrated in section 3.3 at p. 60, in the case of Italian participants, the choice of the language in which to conduct the interview was left to them and they all chose Italian. Interestingly, this passage contains an instance of code-switching triggered by the introduction of the topic of code-switching itself. More generally, for Garofalo the choice of what language to use within the bilingual notes is based on which specific language is associated with a specific realm of experience. This mechanism has been widely recognised in the literature on code-switching. In particular, Gumperz (1982) calls it “situational switching, where a code or speech style is regularly associated with a certain class of activities” (1982:98). The second part of the quote, however, seems to suggest a switch triggered by suggestions coming from the language itself. While the literature on code-switching is vast (a critical introduction to it is offered by Gardner-Chloros 2009), it is mostly focused on conversational code-switching. Moreover, the few works on written code-switching, such as those collected in Sebba et al. (2012), mostly focus on published text and on the way code-switching determines the positioning of the text towards a community of readers. This approach, however, is not pertinent to note taking, a form of writing of which the (at least immediate) addressees are the authors themselves. For the present purposes, in any case, what matters is the recognition of the bilingual nature of these notes, more than the switching mechanism and the possible reasons behind it.

In fact, even if Garofalo’s preparatory notes are globally bilingual, if we move the attention to the local level of the single punch line it is clear that it will appear written in a specific language. And it is here that the bidirectionality of the translation results evident in her case. When
discussing the need to write “new punch lines” to replace, in translation, those that are too culture-specific, Garofalo notes:

Sometimes the new punch line happens to be better than the one in the original and, if it happens to be non language-specific, I “retrofit” it to my sets in the original language too. (GG:99-100)

Garofalo’s bilingual preparatory notes seem to refer to material developed without a specific audience and occasion in mind. Indeed, her writing technique, as she explained (see Appendices A.1.2 and A.1.3), consists of writing down some unrelated “ideas” and then editing and “connecting” them when the need to prepare a set for a specific event, for instance a festival, presents itself. An alternative writing technique consists of always writing material with a specific audience and occasion in mind and then extrapolating those ideas from this context-specific text for their possible usages in other contexts, i.e. as part of other sets. This is the technique used, for instance, by Romina Puma. A consequence of this technique is that the preparatory notes will be written in one language only and that the choice of which language to use for this purpose (and hence, it might appear at first, the directionality of the translation that might be performed in the future) is determined by the occasion for which the material is originally written. This is exemplified by the following extract from the interview with Puma:

GP – Now you are writing a show for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which means it’s going to be in English, but I saw you trying out parts of it in Italian. Do you tend to write more in English or Italian?

RP – It depends, some pieces are born in Italian since they are born for the London Puma, but actually other pieces are written in English, although they are first tried out in Italian. (RP:546-550)

The last sentence, however, seems to complicate things further. The language in which the notes are written is not always the same, it seems, as the language in which the material is first “tried out”. This seems in contradiction with the suggestion that the choice of the first language, and hence of the direction of the translation, is, at least in this case, dictated by the language associated with the first occasion available to perform that material. Puma’s choice of the words “tried out”, as opposed to “perform”, however, seems to suggest a hierarchy of importance. Here, Puma is, in fact, referring to material she is writing with the Edinburgh Fringe in mind, a

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56 The subject of culture-specificity will be discussed in the paragraph 5.6.
very important occasion, in comparison to which her trying it first in Italian at the *London Puma* comedy club seems to represent for her, indeed, just a “try out”. The question of directionality of translation, then, in this case becomes really complicated, since it is not clear, when she performs in English material for which she originally wrote notes in English but that she first performed in Italian, whether she is performing a translation from the mental text of the performance in Italian or from the original notes written in English. From what was said before, it is clear what the first interpretation would be more consistent with the idea of the essentially oral nature of stand-up comedy, in which notes represent not instances of text, but just instances of pre-text. This complexity of directionality, however, should not be completely “explained away” by a theoretical assumption. The difficulty, if not the outright impossibility, of determining a clear directionality of translation is, in fact, a mark of self-translation in general and of oral self-translation in particular. Oral self-translation, then, seems to confirm itself as that “time-language(s) continuum of variations and repetitions” that was hypothesised in section 2.4 (particularly at pp. 43-44) of the present study.

### 5.4 Humour translatability

The debate on the translatability of humour seems to be almost as old as the reflection on humour itself. Joseph Addison (1672–1719), for instance, used translatability as a criterion to separate “good wit” from “bad wit”, which is identified with puns:

> Having pursued the history of a pun, from its original to its downfall, I shall here define it to be a conceit arising from the use of two words that agree in the sound, but differ in the sense. The only way, therefore, to try a piece of wit is to translate it into a different language. If it bears the test, you may pronounce it true; but if it vanishes in the experiment, you may conclude it to have been a pun. (Addison & Steele [1711] 1982:343)

The passage above, beyond the hierarchy of value it establishes between puns and non-puns, limits untranslatability to the former only. This view seems to find confirmation in the interviews collected in this study. While making exceptions, in fact, for jokes based on wordplay, which will be discussed in the next paragraph, comedians insisted on the relatively non-problematic nature of the task of translating their material. In doing this, the success or failure of the translation was identified with its comedic effectiveness, in other words with its *funniness*, as judged by the comedians themselves. Methodologically speaking, this might raise concerns of reliability. In my personal experience observing comedy performances and discussing them with the comedians,
however, I have come to the conclusion that comedians might exaggerate the perception of response to their own performances in absolute terms (every good performance is a “killing”, every bad one a “dying”) but they are usually very good judges of the relative strengths of the single jokes or routines. If they were not, in fact, they would not be able to select and improve their material by means of trying it out in front of an audience, which is how they usually develop their material, and therefore would lack a skill that is absolutely essential for this oral form. An example of this perceived effectiveness of translation is offered by the following extract from the interview with Romina Puma:

GP – Can you remember cases when the translation of material was particularly problematic?

RP – Not that many, most of my material works equally well in a language as in the other. Obviously there are some references that needed to be adapted. (RP:555:558)

The following extract, instead, is from the interview with Swedish comedian Magnus Bertnér:

GP – And how much do those bodies of material [in English and Swedish] overlap?

MB – The material I write here in England usually works in Sweden too, while most of the stuff I talk about in Sweden wouldn’t make any sense to people here. For instance, Swedish politics is of no interest to people here, while UK politics might be of some interest for a Swedish audience, provided, of course, that you limit yourself to the main figures and events. Apart from that qualification, I do have a lot of material that is the same in both languages. (MB:1630-1635)

Francesco De Carlo is even more assertive:

GP – What level of difficulty did you experience in this translation activity [your Italian material for your Edinburgh Fringe 2014 show in English]?

FD – If I can say so: minimal. Particularly if you consider my poor English$^{57}$. (FD:1868-1869)

$^{57}$ It should also be remembered, however, that people with a low level of competence in the target language might underestimate the difficulties of translations, for instance by using “false friends” without knowing that they are indeed so.
On the other hand, Giada Garofalo offered a more nuanced view, particularly with reference to her experience of translating an entire solo show from English into Italian, observing that “transferring material from English to Italian is more difficult than the other way round, which is what I used to do” (GG:291-293). Her reasons for this judgement will be discussed in section 5.6, particularly at pp. 119-121, but even in this case Garofalo concluded that “[a]t the end, though, the show went well, at least according to the feedback I received” (GG:303).

A couple of cases in which the translation was perceived to have failed are discussed in the interview with Romina Puma:

GP – […] I remember that, when you started in English, you had jokes about how embarrassing the name Romina is for an Italian, due to the association with the female singer from the very “cheesy” duo Al Bano & Romina. You really struggled to translate those jokes in English, right?

RP – Yes, I tried to change the reference by introducing a comparison with a female name that might be equally embarrassing, because of its association with an equally embarrassing popular culture figure, but it never worked and at the end I just removed those jokes from my set. In my restaurant set there was another joke based on the word “hospitality”, which in Italian recalls the word “ospedale”, but in English it did not work and I removed it too. (RP:559-567)

Puma’s explanation of the second alleged translation failure is actually quite surprising, since it is difficult to see why a bilingual pun on the words *hospitality* / *ospedale* would stop working when translated into a monolingual pun based on *hospitality* / *hospital*, given the strong affinity between the words *ospedale* and *hospital*. One possibility is that, by becoming monolingual, the pun became too obvious. Another possibility, however, is that, while Puma is attributing its failure to its supposed untranslatability, the joke was simply not strong for the more comedy-savvy English audience58. In attributing this failure to a challenge in translation, Romina Puma is, in a sense, falling into the same fallacy of those comedians who perform in English at the bilingual *London Puma* comedy night and attribute *all* the failures of provoking laughter, even those produced by their weakest jokes, to these jokes being “lost in translation” on the ears of the mainly Italian audience. It is possible that the myth, as it might be called given that it seems to be a contradiction with the evidence, of humour untranslatability might sometimes be invoked, consciously or not, as a scapegoat for all sorts of comedic failures.

58 The importance of the characteristics of a particular “comedy scene” for translation will be discussed in section 5.9.
A reference to how widespread this myth seems to be can be found in the following extract from the conversation with Francesco De Carlo:

Everybody\textsuperscript{59} keeps telling me: how can you translate your jokes in English? For me it looks like the least of all difficulties. Here you have an audience that is so prepared about comedy that translation becomes a detail. (FD:1869-1871)

In the following sections, some of the possible reason behind this myth will be suggested.

5.5 The problem of wordplay

A case in which the common belief in humour untranslatability seems to be at least partially corroborated by this study’s findings is the case of wordplay, particularly with regard to the passage between the English and the Italian language. Although with reference to a completely different context, that of the translation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Tim Parks asks himself:

Does English perhaps have a tradition of playing with vocabulary (made all the easier by the lack of inflection – nouns and adjectives that become verbs, etc.) which Italian does not? Or might it be that Italian ‘plays in a different way’? These are not questions I feel capable of dealing with here (or elsewhere perhaps), but it is inescapable that texts of this creative intensity alert us to the notion that a certain kind of richness may reside only in a certain language. (Parks 1998:78)

Eco (2003) also observes the same asymmetry, with reference again to Joyce, but this time to his own translation into Italian of a section of *Finnegans Wake*. Eco observes:

Joyce si trova a rendere una lingua, così docile al pun, al neologismo e all’inscatolamento di parole come l’inglese (beneficiato dall’abondanza di termini monosillabici) in una lingua come l’italiano, resistente al neologismo per agglutinazione.

[Joyce finds himself translating from English, a language so malleable to puns, neologisms and embedding of words (thanks also to the abundance of monosyllabic words), to Italian, which rejects neologisms by agglutination.] (2003:304, my translation)

\textsuperscript{59} Francesco does not offer a qualification, but from the context it seems clear that he is referring to other comedians.
In the case of the participants to this study, the investigation of how they deal with wordplay in their self-translating behaviour was made difficult by the fact that most of them declared not to be interested in this type of humour. For instance, Giada Garofalo declared:

GG – I don’t rely much on wordplay in either language. I guess it depends on what interests you in the process of doing comedy. For me wordplay is too “technical”, I am much more interested in developing the “raw” ideas, so to speak. (GG:103-105)

The reasons for this lack of interest seem to vary, for instance in the case of Luca Cupani an element of “tactical” calculation seems also to have played a role:

GP – […] you don’t seem particularly interested in wordplay, such as puns. Is it a choice of style or is it due to the fact you switch between two languages?

LC – It’s a choice, which originated from the fact that during my very first gig, the one at the Comedy Store, we started in 29, I was one of the last to perform and only four of us survived the five minutes. So I had the chance to notice that most of the comedians before me were eliminated because of their puns. In most cases the setup was very long and the punch line was very disappointing, with the disappointment being sanctioned by a red card. So I thought better of making the same mistake. More generally speaking, I find wordplay for wordplay’s sake a bit sterile. (LC:760-769)

Luca seems to exclude that this choice might be associated with the need to perform in two different languages. Antonello Taurino, on the other hand, is among those participants who do not deny an interest in wordplay in their dominant language, but they do not make any attempt to translate them in the less dominant language:

AT – I don’t do much of it [wordplay] in English, since most of my material is a translation from the Italian, so the jokes based on wordplay don’t pass through the translation filter. In Italian, instead, I do some wordplay, even in my theatre shows, in a supposedly “noble” context, so in a context where you shouldn’t find them. (AT:1141-1144)

The last sentence points to another dimension of the debate: wordplay, particularly puns, are often considered a “low” form of comedy, particularly in the Italian alternative comedy scene. This might, at least in part, be associated with the lack of a literary tradition, which was observed by Parks:
The invention of compound words, the deployment of bizarre and loose syntax, have a long tradition in English. Many other writers before and after have played the same games. They are not in the end so extraordinary, whereas this does not appear to be the case in Italian. (Parks 1998:89)

The paradox is that this rejection is stronger in those very comedy circles that look for their inspiration in English language comedy tradition. Participant Antonello Taurino noticed that this rejection is then back-projected, so to speak, onto the English language tradition itself, to the point that he noticed Italian comedians “reacting with rage at anybody saying, for instance, that in Anglo-Saxon stand-up comedy there is also room for puns” (AT:1016-1017). The most extreme case is that of Satiriasi, a Rome-based comedy collective of whom Francesco De Carlo is a member, which has a manifesto that forbids wordplay, although leaving some room of interpretation. Point seven of the manifesto, in fact, reads: “Non si fanno giochi di parole a meno che non siano frutto di uno studio tale da giustificarne il senso” [Jokes based on wordplay are not allowed, unless they are the result of a study that justifies them, my translation] (Anon. 2012, online). In his interview, De Carlo defended this policy as a way to inhibit “lazy” humour and stimulate creativity (FD:1805-1809), but at the same time he admitted to sometimes breaking the rule. In his interview, he also mentions a case of pun translation, the only one mentioned in any of the interviews. The joke in question is as follows (FD:1815-1818):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Il Papa è ossessionato dal sesso: scriverà un libro sulla storia dell’universo intitolato “Dal Big Bang al Gang Bang”.</td>
<td>The Pope is obsessed with sex: he will write a book on the history of the universe entitled “From Big Bang to Gang Bang”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: De Carlo’s example of translated wordplay.

The reason why this joke was easy to translate even if based on wordplay, however, is that the keywords in the original Italian were already in English. Apart from this exception, wordplay was unanimously considered by the participants to this study “impossible” to translate. An example
is offered by the following extract from the interview with Katsura Sunshine, a bilingual English-Japanese performer of traditional Rakugo humorous storytelling:

GP – Does Rakugo rely much on forms of wordplay, such as puns?

KS – There are some stories based on wordplay and I simply don’t do them when I perform in English, it would be like beating your head against the wall and there is no need to do that, with so many stories to choose from. I just pick stories that don’t pose that kind of problem. (KS:1489-1492)

While understandable, the choice of avoiding wordplay in this specific case can be seen as posing some problems. According to Morioka & Sasaki (1990), “a jiguchi, ‘pun’, is the most traditional form of the ochi” (1990:71, original emphasis), i.e. of a Rakugo punch line. Katsura Sunshine’s choice not to include puns into his English performances could, then, be seen as in contradiction with the ambition stated in this interview of giving his Western audience an experience of Rakugo that is as faithful as possible to its original (although, of course, no exemplification can ever fully represent what it exemplifies). It can be argued, consequently, that a rewriting of the original Japanese puns into new and, with all probability, completely different English puns, as suggested by Delabastita (1993:134) as one of the possible strategies to translate puns, might have, in this case, offered a stronger functional equivalence to the original text than the choice of excluding them altogether.

The problem, however, is whether this choice would have represented a translation under the definition chosen for the present study. Indeed, the case of covert self-translation is completely different from that of overt allographic translation. In the latter case, the rewritten pun in the target language is nevertheless considered the result of an act of translation because it is part of a target text that, as a whole, is assumed as a translation, so the assumption extends to its parts. On the contrary, it is typical of self-translation, as Fitch (1988) noticed with reference to Beckett, that the results of acts of translation are often alternated with the results of acts of completely new writing, which might or might not be later translated in the opposite direction. The assumption of translation (on the part of, as was decided that should be in this specific case, the translators themselves), then, cannot be global to the entire target text, but will become local to those and only those parts of the target text that are not assumed as acts of complete new writing. If this is the case, then it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the rewriting of a new pun in the target language, even if it replaces one in the source language, might be assumed by the self-translators as belonging to their acts of translation, as opposed to those acts of
complete new writing that self-translation also allows for and is usually intertwined with. Moreover, if this is true for the rewriting of a pun with another pun, the other possible strategies identified by Delabastita (1993:134), such as removing the pun altogether or replacing it with a non-pun, are even less likely to be assumed as translations by the (alleged, or actual but with reference to other parts of the text) self-translator. The only exception is represented by the strategy consisting in the “literal rendering of the source text pun in the target language” (1993:134), as in the example from De Carlo reported above, but the cases when this is still possible while keeping the comedic effectiveness of the joke are probably not very frequent. In conclusion to this section, then, in the case of wordplay the evidence seems to suggest that, if the criterion for translation is considered to be the assumption of translators from the alleged translators themselves, wordplay will need to be considered untranslatable60.

5.6 Humour effectiveness and language-specificity

With regard to the impact on humour translation of the different characteristic of the target language itself, four themes have emerged from the interviews in this study: rhythm, flexibility, word order and gender.

The difference in rhythm between English and Italian is widely recognised in the literature, particularly with reference to literary translation. Eco (2013), for example, commenting on Joyce’s own translation of a section of *Finnegans Wake*, comments that “[s]e il testo inglese ha un ritmo jazz, quello italiano ha un andamento operistico” [if the English text has a jazz rhythm, the Italian text has an operatic pace] (2003:305, my translation). Literary translation is particularly affected by this problem because what seems to distinguish it from other types of translation, such as technical translation, is the need to preserve the stylistic aspects of the text, as well as its content. Parks (1988), for one, has dedicated an entire monograph on this subject, entitled *Translating style*, which focuses on the Italian translation of English-writing modernists such as Joyce and Beckett, authors who put language experimentation at the centre of their work. This makes the study of their translation particularly revealing of the differences between the stylistic arsenal available in Italian and in English, which can be applied to gain a better understanding of the difficulties faced by the comedians in this study. For instance, commenting on the Italian translation of Joyce’s *The Dead*, Parks observes:

60 More precisely, it will appear as untranslated (never assumed as having been the object of translation).
Italian obviously does not have the resource of an Anglo-Saxon vocabulary with its huge stock monosyllables, while in general, of course, it is miserably difficult [when translating into Italian] to establish a rhythmical style while maintaining the same semantic content and the same level of register. (Parks 1998:51)

Indeed, the same difficulty in preserving the rhythm of the original in translation is lamented by some of the participants to this study, in particular Giada Garofalo for the English-Italian pair, but also Katerina Vrana (English-Greek), Katsura Sunshine (English-Japanese) and Francis Foster (English-Spanish). An example is offered by this exchange between me and Giada Garofalo about her English translation of some material originally written in Italian:

GP – Looking at this specific routine, you said that the punch line was completely different in the Italian version. Do you remember what it was?

GG – Yes, I was imagining that they were advertising an auto-pilot system with the slogan “Non sbagli mai rotta”, “You never get the route wrong”. But in translation the rhythm got lost. What I liked of the Italian version was the sound of the term “rotta”, with its “r” and “t” clear-cut sounds and its “ta-ta” kind of rhythm. (GG:251-256)

Just like Parks in the passage quoted above, in which the difficulty to maintain the rhythmical style was related to the availability in English of “an Anglo-Saxon vocabulary with its huge stock monosyllables” (1998:51), Garofalo also attempts a generalisation based on the different vocabulary available in the two languages:

By the way, I think that the English language generally has more of those clear-cut endings [of words] that make it more “punchy”, more apt to deliver a punch line. I think this is one of the reasons why stand-up comedy developed in the English-speaking world. The Italian language is, sometimes, too mellow for these purposes [...] (GG:257-261)

Although with reference to the English-Greek language pair, Katerina Vrana agrees almost to the word:

English has a complete different rhythm. In English, sentences are shorter, so it is easier to be funnier, because punch lines hit faster and harder. Greek is less “punchy”, so the laughter needs to come from somewhere else. (KV:2160-2162)
A very similar point is also made, with reference to a third pair of languages (English and Spanish), by Francis Foster, who stresses how difficult it is in Spanish to find a “hard sound” to end a punch line (FF:2495-2496). Garofalo even suggests a compensation strategy: “you need to use more words, you need to compensate by offering a richer setup” (GG:270-271). Unlike the allographic translator to whom Parks was referring, the self-translator is not necessarily concerned with “maintaining the same semantic content and the same level of register” (Parks 1998:51) while trying “to establish a rhythmical style” (Ibid.): one of these aims can be sacrificed to preserve the others. Indeed, Garofalo’s compensation strategy of using “more words” can be seen as a renunciation of the aim of preserving register, since a greater verbosity is usually associated with a more formal register, but as a self-translator (as opposed to the literary translator of a canonical author, such as Joyce) she can afford to pay this price. Again, it is the relatively greater freedom of the self-translator that seems to make the difference.

A second challenge is represented by the greater syntactic flexibility of the English language in comparison, in particular, to the Italian one. This was touched upon, in the previous section, by Parks, who in a quoted passage noted that in English wordplay is “made all the easier by the lack of inflection – nouns and adjectives that become verbs, etc.” (Parks 1998:78). Participant Giada Garofalo also mentions the same issue in her interview, offering a specific example:

The English language, moreover, is much more fluid, for instance every word can become a verb, even a simple sound. For instance, from “shhh!” you can derive the verb “to shush” somebody. Now, compare “don’t shush me!” with “non mi dire di stare zitto!”.

Which is more “punchy”? (GG:262-265)

Interestingly, in this passage, the syntactic flexibility of the English language is associated with its rhythmic sharpness: the possibility of deriving a verb out of, in the example, a brief onomatopoeic sound is one of the ways in which in English you can obtain sharp, “punchy” expressions. Although the participants did not elaborate on this, it is plausible that the compensation strategy might be the same, then: embracing the greater verbosity of the target language, maybe in order to make that greater verbosity a source of humour in itself (for instance, by representing a violation of a norm of clarity that might be expected to be observed in that context).

A further difference between English and all the other languages in the participants’ pairs is that the latter are grammatically gendered. This topic is explicitly commented upon, again, by Giada Garofalo, in a passage from her interview that follows directly the one just quoted:
GG – [...] Besides, English does not have genders.

GP – In what sense do you think the absence of genders helps?

GG – Well, it allows for more ambiguity and ambiguity can be used for comic purposes. For instance, I have a routine in which I talk about the difficulty of admitting to yourself that a relationship is not working. It goes: “you know when you’re horny...and you are in bed, and you wait...for your partner...to fall asleep, so that you can masturbate in peace? That’s a relationship that is not working!” Well, in Italian “partner” would become either “compagno” or “compagna”, you would be forced to specify the gender, and this would make the self-recognition more difficult for part of the audience. Not to mention cases in which the audience is intentionally misdirected to think that you are talking about a man, while at the end you reveal that you are talking about a woman, or the other way round. In Italian the ambiguity would be lost from the very moment when you introduce the article! (GG: 265-276)

The absence of grammatical gender, then, is one of the aspects that allows the English language to be an effective vehicle for ambiguity. In this case, it is difficult to see what the compensation strategy could be. If the comic effectiveness of the punch line is strongly dependent on the ambiguity, as it seems to be, then this might represent a case in which it might be deemed untranslatable by the comedian and dropped from the target language set.

In the passage just quoted, Giada Garofalo describes a case in which “at the end you reveal that you are talking about a woman” (GG:284, added emphasis). This offers a segue to the discussion of a further language-specific factor that can affect the translation of material, and in particular of punch lines: the difference in word order between the source and the target language. The reason why this matters is an implicit norm that seems to be shared and followed by most comedians, and sometimes explicitly stated as a rule in comedy courses or manuals: the importance of placing the reveal word of a punch line at the end of the punch line itself. An example is offered by this passage from the interview with Antonello Taurino:

Back to the subject of language, a difficulty I have found is that, as you know, one of the “rules” of comedy is that the word that is supposed to produce laughter needs to be put at the end, but I found that this is more difficult to do in English than in Italian, since the English language seems to impose stricter rules on the sequence of words. For instance, I had a joke about a “green wall”, in which the funny part is that the wall was green, but in English you can’t say “wall green”. (AT: 1268-1273)
This time, it was me who suggested a possible compensation strategy, which was instead rejected by the participant:

GP – You could say “a wall, which happens to be green”.

AT – Yes, but it means that you have to change the entire structure of the sentence. (AT: 1274-1275)

Taurino does not explain, however, why changing the entire sentence would not be acceptable. As Borges wrote in a passage already quoted above, “the concept of the ‘definite text’ corresponds only to religion or exhaustion” ([1932] 2001:69), so it is probable that the latter might offer an explanation. Whatever the reason, Taurino’s refusal offers a negative confirmation, so to speak, of the importance of exercising the self-translator’s freedom in order to provide comedically effective translations.

5.7 Humour effectiveness and culture-specificity

The following extract from the interview with Giada Garofalo touches explicitly on another factor that is usually associated with the perception of untranslatability of humour, i.e. culture-specificity:

[...] when the punch line of a joke happens to be culture-specific or language-specific [...] I need to spend more time on finding an equivalent in the other language, in advance to the first performance in it. [...] Going back to the punch lines, some are indeed untranslatable. For instance, I have a joke in which the punch line is “You should have gone to Specsavers”. Not only does it include a cultural reference, which might not constitute a problem if I deliver it in front of Italian audience members who live in Italy, but the line is a quote from an advertisement campaign, which would be lost as such by its translation into a different language. (GG:87-98)

Later on in the conversation, Garofalo explained to me that the “Specsavers” punch line was, in fact, “found in translation” from the Italian:

GP – Looking at this specific routine, you said that the punch line was completely different in the Italian version. Do you remember what it was?

GG – Yes, I was imagining that they were advertising an auto-pilot system with the slogan “Non sbagli mai rotta”, “You never get the route wrong”. But in translation the rhythm got lost. What I liked of the Italian version was the sound of the term
“rotta”, with its “r” and “t” clear-cut sounds and its “ta-ta” kind of rhythm.
(GG:255-260)

The failure of the new punch line to be translated into Italian was, then, a failure in the restitution to the original language. Moreover, this case demonstrates how, while some changes are forced by the difficulty or the impossibility of a more literal translation, others are not: the translation of the original Italian into English did not present any particular challenge, at least not in terms of meaning, given that Giada’s main concern was that “the rhythm was lost”. We can now ask ourselves why the new punch line was more effective. This will mean leaving the area of translation studies and entering the area of humour studies, i.e. exploring what the successes and the challenges of translation can tell us about humour in general.

The suggestion that will be explored hereafter is that the fact that the new punch line was both more effective, on one hand, and more culture-specific, on the other, might not be completely unrelated. A suggestion in this direction can be found in Balirano (2013), in which the failure to provide a comically effective Italian dubbing of the American TV series *The Big Bang Theory* is interpreted in terms of loss of what the author calls “the community factor” (2013: 571):

One of the possible reasons for this failure is certainly due to the fact that the Italian adaptation of the first episodes arbitrarily and quite illogically levels out many of the linguistic cultural references to the community of nerds represented in the show. (2013: 569)

[...] the community factor is to be seen as instrumental in any representation, since it invites the audience to actively recognise and participate in the process of meaning-making. In TBBT, if we take the artefacts of nerds’ practice to be such variables as clothes, verbal language and facial and bodily gestures, then the potential audience must be able to immediately identify these important aspects, and then map any variation onto the social meaning that the represented community of nerds is trying to unfold. (2013: 573)

In other words, one of the reasons why the (original) *The Big Bang Theory* series is so funny is its culture-specificity, although the culture it is specific to is, in this case, that of “the nerd community” and not a national culture. Chiaro (2007) suggests that the failure to translate effectively the American film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* might be interpreted along similar lines, asking herself whether that failure might be due to “some kind of neutrality and absence of cultural identification with the scene and language” (2007:150). Elsewhere, while lamenting a possible “move in the direction of simplification” (Chiaro 2014:23) of humour from the media
industry to pre-empt translation problems, the same author expresses the hope that “more complex and culture-specifically founded humour, rich in regional variation and idiosyncrasy will continue to pull in the opposite direction and thus continue to create (pleasant) problems to operators in screen translation” (2014:23). The question that seems to emerge, then, is whether this type of translation problem, due to the high level of cultural specificity, can generally be considered “pleasant problems” to have, i.e. if they can be the sign of “better” comedy in the source language, of comedy that is more effective because of its very specificity.

The results observed by Venuti (2002) with reference to two different English translations of the same humorous poem in Italian can be interpreted in this light. In his experiment, Venuti observes the different reaction of a group of readers to two different English translations of a passage in Italian from the Argentine-Italian writer Juan Rodolfo Wilcock. One of these translations, the one considered more humorous by the participants, included a very detailed description of some clothes and Venuti observes that “many readers referred to the increased specificity of the clothing as a primary source of the humour” (2002:14). This is how the author interprets the results:

> The readers evidently brought to the experiment a stylistic expectation for English translations, the knowledge that English demands greater precision and cohesiveness than many of their native languages and therefore the expectation that an English translation of a humorous text will be funny to the degree that it is specific. (2002:14)

The same results, however, can be interpreted as a lesson about humour, instead of as a lesson about translation. Although only repeating the experiment would offer the decisive confirmation, I think we can reasonably predict that the text considered funnier in that study would still be considered funnier than the other text even in the case when the readers did not know that they were both translations of the same text. What the result might suggest, then, is that adding specificity to a text makes it funnier, as any comedian who has done any editing on their own material implicitly knows and as many comedy courses explicitly teach. It might be the case, for instance, that a more specific text is funnier for reasons of incongruity, particularly when the specificity is greatly exaggerated, but it might also be that the role played by specificity is, again, that of strengthening the community factor, in this specific instance with reference to the community constituted by those people who recognise and share the specific knowledge about clothes. Indeed, in *The Big Bang Theory* scientific references are also
presented with a very high level of specificity, which clearly contribute to what Balirano (2013) describes as the nerds community factor.

Culture-specific references, in other words, reinforce the connection with the audience, by reminding the audience that there is some communal identity that they share with the performer, with the recognition of those references representing, so to speak, the “secret handshake” of that specific community. It is in this sense that we can interpret an otherwise quite puzzling phenomenon, which has been almost unanimously confirmed by the participants to this study: the tendency of comedians who belong to an outgroup, for instance who come from another country from the one in which they are performing and that is the native of most of the audience, to adopt, at least ironically, the stereotypes associated with their own group of origin by the host community. An example is offered by this extract of the interview with Antonello Taurino:

GP – What was your material about [when you performed in New York]?

AT – Mainly about the misunderstanding between cultures, about the fact, for instance, that they ask you what they should wear if they decide to come to Italy. Addressing these misunderstandings is always the easiest way to connect across cultures, they are easily recognisable and they can be used to establish a connection from the very start. (AT:1123-1127)

Stereotypes, as was argued for instance by Kramsch (1993), are the way in which a group is traditionally represented in the culture of another group, sometimes for reasons that have more to do with a projection of values, or anti-values, of the second itself than with any “objective” quality of the first. By appearing to adopt them themselves, performers from an outgroup are implicitly establishing a communion with the audience by assuming the audience’s own way of looking at the very outgroup they come from, instead of their own internal perception of it. They might, then, move on to challenge these stereotypes, but only after establishing that first connection by means of their shared recognition.

If we accept this conclusion, i.e. that culture-specificity is in itself something likely to contribute to the comic effectiveness of a joke, then, as Garofalo’s experience seems to confirm, comedians will tend to “improve” their material by constantly making it progressively more culture-specific. The combination of this constant effort from the comedian to improve on the efficacy of their material, on one hand, and of the greater efficacy of the more culture-specific references, on the other, suggests the following prediction: the more frequently a comedian
switches between languages when delivering some material, the more the two versions of that material in the two languages will tend to diverge with time. Confirming this prediction, however, would require an analysis of the material development in time and parallel to that of their translations, which goes beyond the remit of the present study, but which can be considered a potential future line of research suggested by its results.

On a more general plane, this conclusion might even suggest a possible approach to the problem of the “untranslatability” of humour: as Steiner (1998) has argued, the plurality and diversity of languages suggests that languages can be seen as developed in order to isolate people from each other (and, by doing this, to define a community within the linguistic borders of this isolation) as much as to reach out to other people. If this is the case, then the “untranslatable” jokes are more community-reinforcing than the “translatable” ones. The pleasure derived from the “untranslatable” jokes might (at least in part and, of course, mostly unconsciously) depend on their very “untranslatability”, i.e. on the privileged access to their meaning enjoyed by the members of the linguistic community.

The reason why the term “untranslatability” was left in quotes, however, is that there seems to be no obvious reason why a joke with a strong community factor should not, via a process of sometimes heavy adaptation, be translated into a joke in the target language that has an equally strong community factor, although, of course, with reference to the target community instead of the source community. This, after all, is what happened in the case of Garofalo’s “Specsavers joke”, in which the translation into the target language became so rich with target culture-specificity to appear, paradoxically, back-“untranslatable”. If this were always possible, then, untranslatability of humour would indeed be confirmed as a myth, at least with regard to the portion of that belief that can be reconducted to the culture-specificity of references. The very fact that this myth seems to be so widely held, however, seems to suggest that this very possibility might not always be on offer. There seem to be other factors at play which, in many cases, seem to block this route, hence resulting in the perception of untranslatability.

5.8 Humour’s (alleged) untranslatability as a result of limiting factors

The present discussion has now reached a point in which a paradoxical and apparently contradictory situation needs to be addressed. On one hand, in fact, the comedians interviewed in this study seem unanimous in underlining (again, with the exception of wordplay, as was discussed above) the fundamental translatability of their own humorous material. On the other,
they seem to clash against the widely diffused\textsuperscript{61} perception of humour’s untranslatability. A short digression will hopefully contribute to identifying some of the possible reasons behind this contradiction.

For reasons that will soon become clear, let us suppose that an Italian translator is asked to translate, for instance by providing subtitles for a DVD, the following famous routine from Bill Hicks (quoted here from the transcript of a show recorded live at the Dominion Theatre, London, November 1992):

\begin{quote}
I was just down in Dallas, Texas. You know you can go down there and, ah, to Delay Plaza where Kennedy was assassinated. And you can go to the sixth floor of the Schoolbook Depository. It’s a museum called... the Assassination Museum. I think they named that after the assassination. I can’t be too sure of the chronology here but... Anyway, they have the window set up to look exactly like it did on that day. And it’s really accurate, you know, cos Oswald’s not in it. (Hicks 2004:119, original emphasis)
\end{quote}

The translator might be tempted to replace the Oswald reference with another reference more easily recognisable for the Italian audience. For instance, they might opt for a reference to Pietro Valpreda, an Anarchist wrongly accused of the 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan. As was argued in the previous paragraph, this solution would probably result in a joke that is more comically effective than a “literal translation”. Such a choice, however, would appear strongly marked, since it would appear to attribute to Bill Hicks some knowledge of, and some interest in, events from Italian politics that were probably completely alien to him. In other words, the choice would be blocked by the translator’s constraints, which have nothing to do with the comic efficacy of the jokes. Although with reference to a completely different situation, dubbing, Zabalbeascoa (1996) describes how the search for the most comically effective translation might be constrained by other factors:

When trying to produce a situation comedy by means of translating situation comedy, humour and comic effect are obviously going to be priorities of a very high order for the translation of the text as a whole, even if there is some hidden motivation acting as top priority. In keeping with this, it would seem logical to judge the merit of a dubbed version on how funny the result is, rather than on how faithful it is on any other level. Even so, it should be acknowledged that translators for film and TV usually have a tricky balancing act to perform, the question being to what extent the verbal expression of the jokes can deviate from

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{61} The empirical confirmation of how much diffused this perception, of course, goes beyond the limit of this study.
\end{footnote}
The constraint of referential plausibility, however, did not always prevent the search for the funniest translation of this joke. Indeed, the reason why the Kennedy’ assassination joke and the Piazza Fontana bombing candidate translations were chosen for this discussion is that they represent the actual translation choice, as documented in the blog Anon. (2011, online), made by Italian comedian Daniele Luttazzi in one of his instances of comedy plagiarism. This type of plagiarism has much in common with the type of comedy self-translation performed by the participants to the present study. First of all, both activities are an instance of covert translation. The reason for keeping translation secret is, of course, different: in the case of self-translating stand-up comedians, it is a reason of irrelevance to the needs and interests of the audience, while in the case of plagiarism it is the need to cover the theft. Regardless of the reason, however, both translations are clearly covert translations. The second similarity is that, in both cases, the translated text is not attributed to any other author than the performers / translators themselves, in the first case because they are the same person, in the second case because the joke is surreptitiously appropriated by the performer. The result, in any case, is that both the self-translating comedian and the covertly translating plagiarist enjoy a level of (supposed) authorial freedom that is much greater than that normally allowed to the allographic, overt translator. Indeed, seen in terms of translation, the case of Daniele Luttazzi, besides the obvious moral and legal considerations, can be considered as a clear success story for comedy translation, since it resulted, until the plagiarism was discovered, in a hugely successful comedy career. This does not mean, however, that Luttazzi made always the most of his ill-gotten “authorial” freedom. The example below is a case in the point. One of the reasons that Bill Hicks’ original joke is so effective is, in fact, that Lee Harvey Oswald is officially considered the author of Kennedy’s assassination, so the joke has a “shock factor” consisting in the fact that it casts doubts about the “official truth”. On the other hand, Pietro Valpreda was acquitted and was until his death widely considered to be innocent. A more effective free translation, which would have kept the same shock factor, would have been: “I went to the John Paul II Assassination Attempt Museum. It’s really accurate, you know. ’Cause Ali Agca’s not in it”.

More generally speaking, the freedom enjoyed by the covert self-translator, and the plagiarist, might contribute by contrast to a better understanding of the loss of comic effectiveness in

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62 See Caimotto (2014) for a reconstruction of the case and for an attempt to discuss it in terms of translation. 63 The subject of authorial freedom in self-translation was discussed in section 2.4.
other instances of humour translation, in which this freedom cannot be enjoyed. The supposed untranslatability of humour might, at least in part, be attributed to the fact that those very adaptations that are required to obtain a truly comically effective translation are blocked by concerns of plausibility, referential fidelity or translation ethics. Moreover, the translators in this study are not only translators, but comedians. Far from suggesting that only comedians can translate comedians, the following observation from Hofstadter (1997) seems nevertheless to make an important point:

In short, to translate something witty requires a witty translator. This is hardly profound, and yet witty translators just don’t seem to be in the mind of people who prematurely pronounce so many works “untranslatable”. (1997:394)

According to the evidence collected during this study, a hypothetical community of translators who enjoy the same freedom from these constraints that orally self-translating comedians seem to enjoy in their practice, and are as witty, would be unaffected by the curse of humour untranslatability.

5.9 Translating for a comedy scene

One factor, the importance of which became progressively clear to me in the course of collecting the interviews, is that stand-up comedy is translated not only for a specific language and culture, but also to a specific sub-culture, most importantly to a specific comedy scene: a specific system of venues, patronage, rules, taste and expectations.

This is particularly clear in the case of Italy, in which at least two distinctive and competing comedy scenes can be identified, one of which defines itself by using the linguistic loan stand-up. The fact that this expression has been imported without translation does not mean, of course, that the meaning it has acquired in the Italian discourse is the same as the meaning it has in the English-speaking world. On the contrary, the way the meaning of this expression has shifted as a result of the import can be seen as highly indicative of the way in which this specific comedy scene has established itself in Italy.

First, in Italy stand-up is seen as a style of comedy that has been imported from abroad, specifically from the United States. This is made clear, for instance, in this passage from the interview with Antonello Taurino:
In my opinion, for us in Italy to do stand-up is like for somebody from Bergamo to play jazz, or for somebody from Veneto to dance pizzica\textsuperscript{64}: it’s more than legitimate, particularly in the globalised world we now live in, but we need to be aware that it is not something that our ancestors had in their genes, so to speak. (AT:1067-1070)

In a country often affected by “esterofilia” (xenophilia), particularly for all things American, this connotation is not completely inconsequential to its being considered as “better” than the Italian mainstream comedy (see below for an analysis of this “better”).

Secondly, in Italy stand-up is seen as alternative to the mainstream comedy scene. This is mostly centred on character and sketch comedy, sometimes based on “tormentoni” (catch-phrases), with the TV program *Zelig* often quoted as the main embodiment of this mainstream. This leads to the foreshadowing of the differences between these two forms of comedy, through which the concept of stand-up is constructed for the Italian context. Participant Giada Garofalo described this situation in her interview with the following words:

> There seems to be a battle going on in Italy between different factions, which have different ideas of what comedy should be, and I think that the expression “stand-up comedy” is used as a weapon in this battle. It is normal for a phase in which the ground shifts, it happened the same in the 80s in the UK with the emergence of Alternative Comedy. (GG:431-435)

One of these differences is that stand-up comedy is both developed in and targeted to live performances in small comedy clubs, while mainstream comedy has television as both its origin\textsuperscript{65} and its intended destination. In this specific case, there seems to be no shift from the concept of stand-up in the Anglo-Saxon world, suffice to say that the most successful stand-up show on British TV is entitled *Live at the Apollo*; while recorded in a massive theatre, it seems to present itself as a mere “fly on the wall” recording of a live event.

Another difference that is often underlined is that stand-up requires comedians to perform as themselves, instead of playing a character. Comedian Edoardo Ferrario ventures into the following definition: “Stand up [sic] comedy è quando un comico sale sul palco e parla delle sue esperienze personali” [Stand up comedy is when you go on stage and you talk about your personal experience] (Menichella 2014, my translation). As an example of how much this contradicts traditional expectations about comedy, an Italian audience member who saw me in...

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\textsuperscript{64} A dance traditional to Salento, in Southern Italy, where Taurino was born and raised before moving to Milan.

\textsuperscript{65} Often through “laboratori” (“labs”) linked to TV programmes, particularly to the aforementioned *Zelig*. 

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London performing a set in which I talked about losing my job was very surprised to hear me still talking about it during the after-show drinks, saying that he thought it did not really happen to me, but was just part of my “character”. Despite this, however, in the English-speaking world such a definition would be considered far too restrictive, since it would exclude not only character comedians, but also pun specialists such as Tim Vine or absurdists such as Ross Noble.

Stand-up comedy is also seen as uncensored and open to tackling taboo subjects in an uncompromising way, as opposed to the strongly edited material of the mainstream. Even in the aforementioned Zelig labs, which are targeted to aspiring comedians who, in most cases, will not make the TV programmes, comedians are assigned an autore (script editor) and their material is heavily edited. This was issue was discussed in the interviews with Romina Puma (RP:448-465) and Antonello Taurino (AT:886-893). As a particularly revealing example, the website of the satellite channel Comedy Central Italia presents its show “Stand Up Comedy” with the following words: “Uno show di satira scorretta, con sette comici che non risparmiano nessun argomento tabù”[A show of incorrect satire, with seven comedians who will not avoid any taboo subject]66. This is in sharp contrast with the perception, shared by many comedians, that in the English-speaking world topics such as race or paedophilia have of late acquired a stronger taboo connotation than ever before. There might, however, be some justification in this idea that stand-up comedy is free from some of the taboos that limit the Italian mainstream comedy, for reasons partly associated with the previous point: more than religion or politics (after all, in Italy there is a long tradition of satire on these topics), the real taboo that seems to be broken in the porting to Italy of stand-up is the taboo of the uncensored personal confession.

Finally, stand-up comedy is seen as more intellectually and artistically ambitious than mainstream comedy. The following quote from an Italian online magazine is particularly revealing:

La Stand Up Comedy di primo acchito potrebbe essere definita come il cabaret all’americana ma incapperemmo in un errore clamoroso, perché mentre il cabaret è (o perlomeno dovrebbe essere) puro intrattenimento, *per ridere senza pensare*, una comicità, insomma, “di pancia”, la Stand Up Comedy invece è qualcosa di molto diverso. Si pone, sì, *l’obiettivo di divertire ma anche quello di far riflettere*, di far nascere un punto di vista alternativo su quanto ci circonda.

Stand Up Comedy at a first glance could be defined as American-style cabaret, but by doing so we would make a massive mistake, because cabaret is (or at least it should be) pure entertainment, something that makes us laugh without thinking, a type of comedy in a way “from the belly”, Stand Up Comedy instead is something completely different. It does set itself the goal of entertaining but also the goal of making people think, to bring about an alternative point of view on the world around us. (Monforte 2013, original emphasis, online, my translation)

If this definition can fit perfectly the comedy of a Bill Hicks, a Doug Stanhope or a Dylan Moran, it would also be very easy to think of stand-up comedians in the English-speaking world who do not share such a lofty ambition.

In conclusion, the term stand-up comedy has shifted in the import into the Italian discourse by acquiring a meaning that is both more restrictive and more prescriptive than its original English one. Participant Antonello Taurino is conscious of this semantic shift, as can be seen from the passages from his interview:

GP – And what about stand-up comedy? What role does it play in Italy? How is it seen?

AT – Good, I’m happy I can talk about this, after so many arguments I had in Italy on this very subject! To describe what is going on I invented the expression misunderstand-up comedy. (AT:987-989)

GP – My impression is that in Italy the concept of stand-up has been redefined in order to oppose it to the mainstream.

AT – Exactly, we noticed what we did not have and we extrapolated it from everything else around it.

GP – Maybe that was a needed to compensate what was going on in the mainstream?

AT – Yes, I agree. What we noticed was the satirical aspect of it, which in Italy we didn’t have, since TV has always been under the direct control of political parties. That does not seem to be the case in America and the UK where, in most cases, if something works commercially, they keep it. So, what we liked of stand-up comedy is that it was “caustic”. It was, indeed, a misunderstanding, but a productive one as long as it stimulates us to be freer in our expression. (AT:1014-1024)

67 The term normally used in Italy for mainstream comedy.
This shift results, inevitably, in a difference in expectations, between, for instance, a stand-up comedy show in English in London and one still in English but performed in Italy, a difference that might pose challenges for the performers who move between the two scenes, which might require some adaptation or compensation.

Moreover, translation might represent not only something that happens between the comedy scenes, but also something that played an integral part in the establishment of the stand-up comedy scene itself outside the English-speaking world. This is suggested, for instance, by Greek participant Katerina Vrana, who thus describes the traditional Greek comedy scene:

KV - Either political satire or very basic comedy, in which comedians mock fat people, gay people, ethnic minorities and so on, although there has been much improvement, starting from the 50s and the 60s. In the 90s there was an explosion of good sit-coms, but then it went downhill again. In 1995, some people came back from the United States and started doing stand-up for the first time, stealing material from Bill Hicks and George Carlin.

GP – Without crediting them?

KV – Yes, without crediting them, because nobody knew them in Greece anyway.

GP – This is very interesting, since exactly the same thing happened in Italy.

KV – I think the same thing happened in every country where stand-up was imported, it’s how it started. (KV:2224-2233)

This represents the same type of covert translation that was discussed above in the case of Daniele Luttazzi. A more overt type of translation, however, also played an important role in the establishment of the stand-up comedy scene in countries like Greece and Italy, as reported by participant Francesco De Carlo:

In 2008-2009, I discovered ComedySubs, a fan subs website that I think was at the origin of the interest for stand-up comedy in Italy. When I saw the classic of American and British stand-up comedy, particularly George Carlin, but also Bill Hicks, Chris Rock, Eddie Izzard and so on, I discovered that there was a type of comedy that was different from the type that was on the Italian TV, which never interested me, neither as a comedian nor as an audience member. It’s from that discovery that [Rome stand-up comedy club] Satiriiasi was born (FD:1802-1807).
If the act of translation can be found at the origin of a comedy scene, translating material between languages also involves adapting to the demands of a specific comedy scene. Not only, but in a wider sense of the word, some form of translation might also be required by the transfer of material between different comedy scenes within the same language and even within the same country. Just like the literary system according to Even-Zohar (1990:9-13), the comedy system is actually a polysystem composed of different strata, distinguished for instance by their different levels of canonisation (1990:15-19). In particular, in Italy the stand-up comedy scene proposes itself as the more canonised stratum, despite the fact that it also represents the newer scene. Considered, moreover, in relation to its culture of origin, “translated” stand-up comedy (whether it is translated in the stricter sense, or it is an original creation but that models itself on the imported canon) assumes what Even-Zohar calls a central position (1990:46). In his own words:

To say that translated literature maintains a central position is to say that it participates actively in modelling the centre of the polysystem. In such a situation it is by and large an integral part of innovatory forces [...]. This implies the fact that no clear-cut distinction is then maintained between original and translated writings, and that often it is the leading writers (or members of the avant-garde who are about to become leading writers) who produce the most important translation. Moreover, in such a state when new literary models are emerging, translation is likely to become one of the means of elaborating new models. [...] It is clear that the very principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the polysystem: the texts are picked according to their compatibility with the new approaches and the supposedly innovatory role that they may assume within the target literature. (1990:46-47)

It is a passage that was worth quoting at length, since it seems to capture different aspects already noted in the establishment of the “translated” stand-up comedy scene, such as the role played by covert translation and the selective attention dedicated to those elements of the source culture that be best used to break new ground. As Even-Zohar also notices, the main condition for this situation to occur is when a literature (a comedy scene, in our case) is “either ‘peripheral’ or ‘weak’, or both” (1978:121), as well as its being “young” (Ibid.) and in the middle of “turning points, crises” (Ibid.). That the stand-up scenes outside the English-speaking world are perceived as such by their own practitioners found frequent confirmation in the interviews. Katerina Vrana, for instance, when asked about the Greek comedy scene, replies:
There is no Greek comedy scene, or at least there wasn’t, until very recently. In Greece, they don’t know what stand-up is, it’s not an established medium of expression. (KV:21182-21183)

With regard to the Italian scene, Giada Garofalo observes that “it seems that the comedy nights are much fewer and far between than in Britain, but the scene is developing” (GG:420-421). There also seems to be, particularly with reference to the Italian situation, a widespread feeling of “turning points, crises” (Even-Zohar 1990:46) reshaping the comedy world. Francesco De Carlo draws an explicit comparison with how stand-up itself developed in Britain:

What I understood, also from conversations with other comedians, is that in Britain at the start of the 80s, at the same time as the emergence of the Punk movement, so late ‘70s-early 80s, there was a transformation with regard to comedy, with the emergence of the Alternative Comedy scene. Before that, comedy here was also much based on characters and on stereotypes, and there was also a strong sketch comedy tradition. In Italy, instead, a different type of comedy has remained dominant, for instance regional comedy […] all this has become very hackneyed. (FD:1880-1894)

Establishing the “translated” (in the loose sense of the world) alternative comedy scene of stand-up comedy, then, is perceived as a way to accelerate the transformation, by replacing the now “hackneyed” old forms. De Carlo’s Satiriasi comedy club even gave itself a “manifesto”, which is something more commonly associated with revolutionary political and artistic movements. The result, however, seems to be a cohabitation of different systems rather than the replacement of one with the other, a cohabitation that is indeed well expressed by Even-Zohar’s term polysystem.

Paradoxically, in this attempt to renew Italy’s comedy scene, the chosen role-models have not been contemporary American and British comedians, but rather now deceased old masters such as Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks and George Carlin. This paradoxical aspect is also predicted by Even-Zohar’s theory of literary interference:

a target literature frequently ignores the contemporary elements of a source literature and goes back to an earlier diachronic phase, often outdated from the point of view of the center of the source literature. (Even-Zohar 1990:71)

Similarly, Even-Zohar’s model also offer an explanation of the exclusion, from the perception of the Anglo-Saxon stand-up comedy scene which was developed to be used as a source for the
new Italian scene, of any aspect which was not considered fit for this purpose, such as wordplay or nonsense comedy. Again, Even-Zohar’s own words are worth quoting in full:

> It is relatively established that peripheral activities using a secondary repertoire tend to regularize patterns that are relatively variegated in a given source. By implication, “regularized” entities are also schematized and simplified. This may mean that while a certain item may have an intricate or plurivocal function within the source literature, its function within the target literature may be more univocal or restricted. (Even-Zohar 1990:71)

Moreover, even from the synchronic perspective, applying concepts from polysystem theory to the description of the comedy scenes involved in bilingual comedy allows for the recognition of their plurality, even within the same language, culture or country. This has important methodological and theoretical consequences for the interpretation of some phenomena investigated in this study. For instance, in section 6.4, at pp. 160-167, the perception of taboo violations will be discussed and it will become clear that some of the apparently contradictory evidence collected on this issue can only be explained by relating it to this plurality.

### 5.10 Conclusions

The analysis of the interviews with bilingual stand-up comedians performed as part of the present study confirmed the actual occurrence of what has been described as oral self-translation of material, according to a definition of translation suitable for this type of detection. This definition has been found to consist in a modified version of the concept of *assumed translation* in which it is the alleged translators themselves who provide the assumption. The source of this translation has been found to consist in what has been described as *mental text*, as opposed to any alleged written source. The directionality of this translation has been found to depend at least in part on linguistic competence. In the case of a high level of competence in the second language, translation has been found to be bidirectional. However, in accordance to what has been argued with regard to self-translation in general, in oral self-translation directionality often appears problematic, to the point that in some extreme cases it can show the character of indeterminacy.

With regard to the comic effectiveness of their translations, the participants have mostly expressed satisfaction with their results and have downplayed the challenges they faced. The exception is represented by wordplay, which under the definition of translation used in this analysis will need to be considered untranslatable, since its translation is normally not assumed
as such by the alleged self-translator. In the case of non-wordplay-related challenges, however, the analysis of some cases in which adaptation was needed has shown that these difficulties were mainly due to reasons of cultural-specificity, but were overcome by recurring to an equal, if not greater, level of culture-specificity in the target language, which in turn resulted into an equal, and sometimes greater, comedic effectiveness.

Finally, in describing and evaluating comedy translation, it is important to recognise that what the material is translated into is not only a language and culture, but also to a specific system of expectations, values, rules, venues, patronage and so forth, which has been described as a comedy scene. In particular, two very different comedy scenes can currently be recognised in Italy, which are not only the target but, in part, also the result of acts of translation.

Broadening the scope further, these considerations lead to a discussion of a possible relationship between effectiveness of comedy and culture-specificity, with the suggestion that greater specificity might be correlated to greater effectiveness. By giving the possibility to seek this greater specificity in the target language, the greater authorial freedom enjoyed the orally self-translating stand-up comedians (as well as by those comedians who perform a covert translation in the act of plagiarising material in another language) was then shown as the reason behind their confidence in the translatability of their own humorous content. The suggestion was then proposed that the widely-held perception of humour untranslatability might, at least in part, be associated with those factors that seem to limit this freedom in other type of translation, such as in overt allographic translation. At the same time, the emergence as a central theme of the comedy scene (described as a specific system within comedy’s polysystem) has underlined the importance of context and, with it, the need to go beyond a description of stand-up comedy translation as a mere transfer of verbal content between languages. The aim of the next chapter is to go further in that direction.
The previous sections have focused on the question of text in oral self-translation of stand-up comedy. This section aims to investigate the dimension of performance. First, its relationship with the text is briefly discussed, suggesting that the idea of the double (declarative and procedural) nature of the mental text of stand-up offers to overcome some of the theoretical difficulties that have been raised with regard to theatre translation, with particular reference to the relationship between the verbal and the gestural. Second, the investigation will focus on how the choice of orally self-translating stand-up comedy, and more generally the choice of the language in which to perform it, can impact on performance. In turn, this will require discussing the relationship between performance and identity, on one hand, and the role played in this relationship by the interaction with the audience, on the other.

In his systematic introduction to the field of performance studies, Carlson (2004) notes that “'[p]erformance’ and ‘performing’ are terms so often encountered in such varied contexts that little if any common semantic ground seems to exist among them” (2004:2). Schechner (1998) is one among many who tries to offer a definition of performance in the context of theatre, by contrasting it with the other “circles” that, according to him, enclose the theatrical experience:

- the drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production68; the theater is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there) (Schechner 1988: 85)

Indeed, when Schechner represents this relationship in a diagram (1988:72), “performance” is represented as the outermost circle, which encloses all the others: performance is all that happens on the stage and around.

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68 Schechner’s notion of “script” seems almost equivalent to what in this study is called “mental text”. The main difference is that Schechner, whose main interest is collaborative theatre and social ritual, underlines the possibility of the “script” to be transmitted: “the script is the domain of the teacher, guru, master” (1988:71).
6.1 From text to performance: performability, gesture and the procedural element of the mental text

More often, however, the element of performance is described as something that establishes a somehow problematic, if not mysterious, relationship with the element of text. In this sense, the idea of the dual nature of the mental text of stand-up comedy might suggest a possible solution to a problem that has for long time puzzled the theorists of theatre translation: how theatre translation can preserve the potentiality for performance that is supposed to have somehow been encoded within the text.

This problem, more specifically, seems to stem from the application to theatre translation of the idea of “dramatic text” as constituted of a duality of elements, of which what is traditionally called “the text” is only a part. This idea was central, for instance, to the project of developing a semiotics of the theatre, particularly as was attempted in Italy from the 1970s onwards. An example is offered by Franco Ruffini (1991:242), who calls these two elements “the ‘text’ of the text” and “the ‘stage’ of the text”. The first is defined as “the rigid, directed, programmed element”, typically embodied, for instance, in the drama’s narrative, while the second is “the flexible, non-directed, non-programmable element”, as is embodied in for instance what Ruffini calls “the character”:

Briefly outlining the dramaturgy of the performance, we could suggest that the textual pole (deriving from both the text and the stage), performs the function of guaranteeing a semantic anchor for the spectator and that the stage pole (it also deriving both from the text and the stage) performs the function of guaranteeing an opening, a zone of profound fruition, or at least, a more personalised zone.

(Ruffini 1991: 274)

Elsewhere, Ruffini defines the dramatic text as a “spettacolo in potenza” [a show in potency] (1978:108, my translation). In similar terms, Pugliatti (1976) uses the metaphor of translation to express the relationship between the textual plane and the stage plane. In his own words:

il piano testuale e il piano scenico sono interrelati non solo in quanto materialmente connessi nella “traduzione” fisica; sono, invece, interrelati, nel senso che il primo rappresenta la trascrizione metalinguistica di un progetto per il secondo

the textual plane and the stage plane are correlated not only because they are materially connected in the physical [stage] translation; they are, instead,
correlated because the first is the metalinguistic translation of a project for the second. (1976:80, my translation)

It is from within this semiotic theoretical framework that Susan Bassnett first started her investigation on theatre translation. Bassnett (1978), for instance, starts from the assumption that “a play is far more than a literary text, it is a combination of language and gesture brought together in a harmonious frame of timing” (1978:162). So, if the dramatic text does not contain only those elements that are traditionally considered “textual”, but contains also elements that might be called “stage” or “gestural”, i.e. if it contains all those elements that make it a potential show waiting to be actualised, the question arises as to how these elements can be carried across languages when the text is translated. This question, in turn, depends on the more general question of how and where this “gestural” or “stage” element can be located within the text.

Bassnett (1978) initially identified it in what she called the tempo-rhythms (1978:172) of the text, while later she identified it in the deictic units (Bassnett-McGuire 1985:98). More recently, however, Bassnett became sceptical as to the very possibility of identifying the gestural element within the text and, hence, regarding the possibility of expecting from theatre translators the transfer of something so difficult to locate. In particular, Bassnett (1991) rejects the notion of performability as ill-defined and culture-dependent, while she later suggests that we should go back to seeing drama as literature (1998:99) and considering instead all concerns for performance as external to the task of the translator:

[The task of the translator is to work with the inconsistencies of the text and leave the resolution of those inconsistencies to someone else. Searching for deep structures and trying to render the text ‘performable’ is not the responsibility of the translator. (1998:105)]

Similar considerations have been expressed by many other authors who have recognised theatre translation as a collaborative effort, in which performance is socially constructed instead of being simply “read” within the text. Aaltonen (2000), for one, compares the dramatic text to a flat share, in which successive tenants leave their own contribution. In her words:

Theatre is a communal art form which reaches a number of people simultaneously, and a performance is designed to have an immediate effect on them. It must therefore be tied to its theatrical and sociocultural context even more closely than its literary counterpart. (2000:94)
This reversal of perspective represents, to some extent, the revival of a way of considering the relationship between dramatic text and performance that was traditional before the semiotic turn of the 1970s. A particularly radical example in this direction is offered by Pirandello ([1908] 1994), for whom a dramatic text was completely different from an opera libretto, which is only complete with the addition of the music, in the sense that it represents instead a work that is already complete. In relation to it, then, the work of the actors is a necessary betrayal, similar, according to Pirandello, to the betrayal of the written text perpetuated by illustrators and literary translators. Very interestingly for this study, the only exception where in the theatre “l’originale”, the original, can be represented on the stage without any betrayal occur is, for Pirandello, offered by Commedia dell’arte, because it consists in “uno schema embrionale, e la libera creazione dell’attore” [an embryonic state and the actor’s free creation] ([1908]1994:111, my translation). In that case, then, there are no authors, other than the actors themselves, to betray.

Given the similarities between Commedia dell’arte and stand-up comedy, this suggestion indicates a way out of the difficulties identified by Bassnett, which she often calls “the labyrinth of stage translation”, at least as far as stand-up comedy is concerned. Bassnett’s tortuous path through this labyrinth, in fact, originated from the difficulty of locating the gestural within the verbal text: if this element is difficult to identify in the source text, it will be even more difficult to preserve it in translation. The reason, in turn, why this element was deemed necessary to be identified as part of the verbal text can be found, at least implicitly, in the problem of its transmission across time: since it is the verbal text that is transmitted from person to person across time, it was deemed necessary to locate even the gestural dimension within the verbal text, in order to justify this transmission. This occurred even in the monolingual perspective, with translation only offering a case in which this problem was particularly foregrounded.

However, even if the interpersonal transfer problem was indeed a problem in the case of theatre, Pirandello reminds us of why this is not a problem for Commedia dell’arte and, by extension, for stand-up comedy: in this case, the “author” and the “actor” are indeed the same person, so no interpersonal transfer across time is needed. Once we recognise, then, that the mental text of stand-up comedy is constituted by both a declarative (which encompasses the “verbal” text) and a procedural (which includes, along with others, the “gestural”) element, then there is no need to forcibly try to subsume the second into the first, to shoehorn the gestural into the verbal, so to speak. Procedural memory, after all, is a still a form of memory, i.e. a faculty whose role is to transfer its own content across time, intrasubjectively, so to speak. Even
in the monolingual perspective, in which translation is meant (à la Steiner) as transfer across time even within the same language, stand-up comedians are indeed always self-translators. As the continuity of the self in time relies on memory, locating the “performance” aspect of the “dramatic text” in the field of (procedural) memory allows its transfer in time to become just one aspect of the continuity of the self.

Moving to the bilingual dimension, the question that arises is whether translation will only be a translation of the declarative (verbal) content of the mental text or whether there is such a thing as a translation of the procedural content. As often happens in these cases, the question requires clarifying what is included in the term “translation”. If we include only a translation activity that is both conscious and a precedent to the performance itself, then translation will only apply to the declarative content, since it is in the defining characteristics of declarative memory that it represents the type of memory that can be consciously and voluntarily recalled. If, instead, we extend the concept of translation to include unconscious “translation on the stage”, then we can also include in it the transfer from one language to the other of a particularly ability, such as the ability to improvise or to respond to the audiences’ reaction to a certain punch line. The specific abilities just mentioned are procedural (they are “skills”), but are related to the production of a verbal behaviour. The procedural content of the mental text, however, can also be seen as containing what is often referred to as the “gestural element” of the performance: for instance, the ability to enrich a certain punch line with a facial expression, to move on the stage and to choose the most effective intonation. To summarise, the procedural element of the mental text can be seen as constituted by a) the competence to deliver the verbal content in a specific way, for instance with a specific intonation; b) the competence to produce, around the (declaratively memorised) punch lines, certain still verbal but “unscripted” behaviours, such improvisations, responses, and enrichments added “on the stage” and; c) the competence to produce, again around the declarative core constituted by the punch lines, gestural behaviours, such as movements and facial expressions. Although, as Schechner (1988) pointed out, performance is all that happens on the stage, since even the verbal content is not made present in stand-up comedy if not in performance, from now on saying that the discussion focuses on its “performance elements” will be shorthand for saying that it will focuses on those aspects which, in the theoretical model presented in this study, can be attributed to the procedural part of the mental text.

From the bilingual perspective, this raises the question of whether, for instance, the facial expression associated with a translated punch line will be the same “in the two languages”, i.e.
whether the linguistic context and the more general context, which will include considerations on the composition of the audience, will influence the production of this expression. This would call for empirical investigation, requiring the observation of video recordings in the two languages from the same performer of the “same” (according to the judgement of the performer) punch lines. It is, in fact, only of the declarative content that the “sameness” across languages can be reconstructed from the conscious decision to translate, without having to rely on the problematic notion of equivalence. The identification of these textual / declarative elements (the “what”) that are translated would offer a guide in choosing which video recordings to mine for the differences in “how” this content is performed. For reasons explained in Chapter 3, however, this empirical investigation is left to future research. In the present study, instead, the performance aspects of bilingual comedy will be discussed in light of the comedians’ own experiences of them, as it has been reconstructed through the interviews, along with some references to a few notable cases of audience reception.

6.2 Performance, performativity and identity

Before an empirical observation of these differences can even attempted, however, it is necessary to understand in theoretical terms why this “how”, in which the content of orally translated stand-up comedy is presented, should vary at all in the transfer to a different language (which in turn, as it was shown in the previous chapter, usually entails also a transfer to a different situation). This will require a detour on the notion of performativity, particularly with reference to how it has been used in the field of culture studies to describe how gender and ethnic identity is constructed. The idea originates from Austin (1962), for whom a sentence is performative when “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (1975:6). Following up on this, Butler ([1993] 2011) elaborates: “a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or products that which it names” ([1993] 2011:xxi). Applying this notion of performativity to the subject of gender, Butler ([1993] 2011; 1999) proposes an anti-essentialist theory of gender identity, according to which gender does not precede the discourse practices that name it, but is constructed by means of these practices themselves. Following on from Butler’s work, Fortier (1999) applies the notion of performativity to the problem of ethnic identity, choosing as her case study the Italian community in London. In particular, Fortier is interested in how some places play a particularly important role in allowing the performance of identity to take place, focusing specifically on St Peter’s Italian church in Clerkenwell. According to Fortier, “St Peter’s re-members a place of origins, a place of nostalgia” (1999:53), which allows the performing on what Fortier calls “[t]he sacraments of ethnicity” (1999:54), as she
interprets first communions and the annual procession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Returning the loan of the notion of performative nature of identity back to gender studies, Fortier underlines how ethnic identity construction is, at least partially, performed in this case by means of celebrating the traditional Italian Catholic idea of woman as mother, symbolised by the Virgin Mary.

Fortier (1999)’s application of the idea of performativity to ethnic identity, then, focuses on how St Peter’s church represents a place for identity-constructing performances. Conversely, the very existence of such performances and place might suggest the possibility of identity-subverting performances and of a place dedicated to their enactment. Indeed, going back to that seminal account of the performativity of gender, Butler underlines the possibility of performances that subvert their performative construction, such as in the case of drag, which “mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity” ([1993] 2011:186). More generally speaking, for Butler “there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects” (1999:146). In my own performing experience, I sought this parodic effect when I decided to call my Edinburgh Fringe 2010 show “Giacinto Palmieri is trying to be Italian”, playing with the idea that the performative nature of identity entails the possibility of failure: in that show I was representing myself not only as trying to be Italian, but as failing at it.

The possibility of failure in responding to expectations of national identity contributes, as Butler pointed out, in revealing “the original, the authentic and the real” as a constructed “effect”. The same applies to exaggeration, particularly when it is the “original” that is paradoxically constructed as exaggerated. To use one more example from my own performing experience, I usually address “the elephant in the room” of my strong Italian accent with the words: “Once I joined an acting course and I was told that my Italian accent was overdone”. This type of humour is arguably based on the pleasure of discovering that we are freer than an essentialist/deterministic interpretation of identity would have otherwise implied.

It is, then, in humour and more specifically in comedy that identity subverting performances seem to find the most fertile ground. If a venue for this subversion can be found for the Italian community in London, the bilingual comedy London Puma appears, then, to represent a promising candidate. A direct connection between this place and St Peter’s church, moreover, is embodied by Luca Cupani, who is both a regular performer at the London Puma and an active member the church’s community. In one of his comedy sets at the London Puma, Cupani talked about his experience of watching the Our Lady of Mount Carmel procession, deriving humour
from his feeling sexually attracted to the impersonator of an angel in the procession. By doing so, Cupani mocks the very construction of ethnic identity via the re-enactment of traditional ideas of sexuality and gender described by Fortier (1993) in her study. Cupani’s belonging to both communities, however, is also emblematic of the ambivalence of diaspora members towards questions of identity, in which the continuity with the constructed origins is both sought and challenged.

A further example of humorous identity deconstruction at the *London Puma* comedy club can be seen in what happened when English comedian Tim Shishodia was invited to present a night there, against the custom of having an Italian presenter. Having studied Italian at university level, Shishodia decided to present the night in Italian. Moreover, he pretended to be learning English as a beginner and shared his very modest and tentative efforts in that sense with the audience, who were aware he was English. By doing so, Shishodia parodied what most non-Italian comedians often do with reference to the Italian language when performing at the *London Puma*. It was, to summarise, a performance of what Sieg (2002) calls ethnic drag.

This way of describing what happened in that specific situation might help to shed light on the relationship performativity and performance. While Marinetti (2013), for instance, interprets “performative” as “pertaining to performance” (2013:310), Barker & Galasiński (2001) feel the need to clarify the relationship: “Performative does not refer to a performance by an intentional actor, but to impelled performance of regulatory discourse of power” (2001:87). Schechner (2013), on the other hand, reminds us that any event, action or behaviour may be examined “as performance” (2013:48). It is probably in this distinction between a performative act seen “as” performance and a performative act that is not that the relationship can be clarified. Performative acts that follow “the regulatory discourse of power” are not perceived as performances, but performative acts that subvert these rules are. Moreover, in stand-up comedy it is the situation itself that frames the acts on the stage as performances: performance here is of the type Schechner (1988) calls reflexive: “self-conscious, conscious of its audience, the audience conscious of the performer being conscious of being a performer” (1988:301). This means that expectations are, in a sense, reversed from what happens in normal social situations: stand-up comedians are not expected to embody the “normal”, covertly performative acts, but to “make a show of it”, to bring the performative element to the fore and frame it as a performance. Lockyer & Meyers (2011) describe this reversal of expectations in stand-up comedy as “expecting the unexpected”. Goffman (1974) also underlines how a
performance “in the restricted sense”\textsuperscript{69} (1974:124) can be defined as a particular way to frame a performative act, i.e. as:


Another case where performative acts of identity construction are explicitly framed as performances in a bilingual situation is described by Ladouceur (2013) in her exploration of bilingual French-English theatre in Canada: “the staged bilingual production becomes not only a performance of the play, but also a site in the sense that a bilingual identity is being performatively constructed on stage” (2013:359). What identity is constructed at the \textit{London Puma}, however, is more problematic, as the example of Tim Shishodia’s performance shows.

What seems to happen there is the staging of what Barker \& Galasiński (2001) call “the dilemmatic character of ethnicity”: “It is held to be a feature of the group that is non-essential and changeable, yet at the same time it is claimed as something deeply embedded and universal” (2001:142). Dilemmas and paradoxes often find their expression in humour, since they represent an irresolvable opposition of equally valid but contradictory ideas, i.e. a case of incongruity, which is generally recognised as one of the main sources of humour. It might even be argued that humour discourse is a celebration of what is paradoxical and dilemmatic in our world and life. The dilemma of ethnicity described by Barker \& Galasiński (2001), then, represents a potentially rich source of humour, and a joke I heard from comedian Ivor Dembina as part of his show \textit{Old Jewish Jokes} offers an example. It is, as the title of the show suggests, an old “canned” Jewish joke, which Dembina retold. Here is my reconstruction from memory of his re-telling:

Two Jews are walking in Brooklyn when they pass in front of a church. A sign on the door says: “$1,000 if you convert!” At this point, one of the two friends tells the other: “I’m sorry, but I’m full of debts and I have a family to support, I really need that money. I’m going to convert”. He goes into the church and when he comes back out his friend asks – “Did you convert?”. “Yes”. “And did you get the $1,000?”. “Typical, you Jews only think about money”.

\textsuperscript{69} Goffman ([1959] 1990) had previously defined “performance” in the wider sense as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.” (1959:32)
In this joke, anti-Semitic prejudices are projected onto the Gentile identity as a “deeply embedded and universal” element of it. At the same time, the Jewish / Gentile identity border is recognised as crossable by means of conversion. The paradoxical consequence is that the converted Jew, at the very moment of the conversion, immediately assumes onto himself the “deeply embedded” prejudices that constitute the target of the joke. In equally paradoxical terms, actor, comedian and ethnic studies scholar Darby Li Po Price (2000) writes:

I am of Chinese descent from my mother, and Scots-Irish, Welsh and Cherokee descendent from my father, so in the United States that means I’m Latino to many people. I use this joke as my opener when I do stand-up comedy. (2000:179)

Moving then to discussing the experience of other multiethnic performers, Price notices that “[m]eeting the demands for easily recognizable characters, parts in mainstream movies and television are rarely multiethnic” (2000:182), while live stand-up comedy thrives on the potential for incongruity implicit in hybrid identity and its social perception.

If St Peter’s church, then, is the place where the “deeply embedded” side of the dilemma of the Italian identity in London is performatively embodied, the London Puma comedy club can be seen as the place where the dilemma itself is displayed in all its unresolved, and as such potentially comical, force. Underlying the performative nature of identity, however, means also underlining its construction within a specific situation and for a specific audience. Understanding, then, how identity is constructed and/or deconstructed via the performance of a stand-up comedy set in English and/or in Italian requires a discussion of how this performance is perceived by the audience.

6.3 Performance, audience reception and interaction

The choice of language in which to perform is the most important element in identity construction / deconstruction at the London Puma bilingual Italian / English comedy club. The question that arises is how this choice is perceived by the audience, and particularly how it is perceived to impact on performance. Comedy blogger and founder of the Malcolm Hardee Comedy Awards, John Fleming, so describes his experience, as an audience member at the London Puma, of watching stand-up comedians perform in Italian:

This is the fourth of their shows I have been to and I understand about a quarter of one percent of what is going on in the Italian parts. But the atmosphere is
hugely enjoyable and, to illiterate me, the shows are like watching abstract comedy performance. I watch the visual performance and can appreciate the structure of the emotional delivery of the words and feel the emotional meaning of the words, even though I don’t understand the words. (Fleming 2014, online)

This observation is very interesting as a recognition of the role that non-verbal signals or, at least, the non-semantic aspects of those signals, such as tempo, play in stand-up comedy. It does not say much, however, about the role played by the different languages in the experience of performing and perceiving comedy.

Well known comedy critic Kate Copstick, on the other hand, understands Italian. She also attended the same session as the one Fleming was referring to (18 December 2014) and was interviewed about the experience in the same blog entry. With regard to the performance of Romina Puma and Giada Garofalo on the night, Copstick declares:

If you translated their set into English, it’s just very anecdotal, chatty, kinda Sarah Millican-ish. But the energy and the whole character of doing it in Italian just pulls you in so much more. (Fleming 2014, online)

It is important to note that Kate Copstick at this stage had never seen Romina Puma or Giada Garofalo performing in English, let alone performing a translation of the very same material. What she is doing, then, is comparing an actual performance in Italian with a hypothetical performance of the same material in English. In other words, she is doing the translation herself in her mind. This task, however, appears clearly highly problematic, since it is widely recognised that comedy material can never be abstracted from “the way you tell it”, i.e. from a specific performance style and mode. So the question is: what is the performance style associated by Copstick to the hypothetical Italian translation of Romina Puma’s and Giada Garofalo’s material in, almost literally in this case, the theatre of her mind? The most likely response is that there is no particular performance style associated with it (given that the only one she knows from experience, the one associated with the performance in Italian, is not available for selection), that Copstick is just “thinking” about the material in an abstract, denotative way. If this is the case, then it is obvious that the material will result in something comparatively bland, in this hypothetical translation, to its equivalent in an actual comedic performance. The other possibility is that Copstick is projecting, over this hypothetical translation, the performance style of the English comedian she most closely associates with this material on the ground of perceived similarity of content, who appears to be Sarah Millican. The quite “bland” performing
style of Millican, however, has nothing to with the performing style in English of, for instance, Romina Puma, a much more expressive and extrovert performer. In either case, then, this comparison and its conclusions appear dubiously justified.

This problem, however, does not present itself with regard to what Copstick says about my own performance, since had already seen me in English. Copstick very kindly observes:

Giacinto Palmieri is warm and wonderful when he performs in English but, in Italian, it’s like someone has lit a fire under him. In English, he is black and white; in Italian, he is in colour. (Fleming 2014, online)

Some qualifications are necessary, before their impact on the question at hand can be assessed, in order to place these remarks in their right perspective. The first is that Copstick is comparing my performance on that night with the only other performance she had seen from me before, at the Edinburgh Fringe 2009, more than five years earlier. As a consequence, a certain level of development in my performance skills needs (hopefully) to be taken into account. The other qualification is that it is very difficult to isolate which aspects of the performance are linked to the usage of a particular language from other aspects that influence it. In particular, the audience of the London Puma were mostly composed by regulars, whom we performers knew quite well and feel very relaxed in front of. Equally important, we were used to playing in that specific room’s settings and with the support of each other, so all these elements amount to a feeling of confidence and relaxation that can only have a positive influence on our performance. Moreover, the Italian audience itself seemed to be particularly warm and responsive, as was observed in the interview with Romina Puma with reference to the response rewarded to the “visiting” English-speaking comedians. All this conceded, however, Copstick’s observations about the particular “energy”, “character” and “colourfulness” of the performances in Italian, in comparison to those in English, demands careful consideration and discussion.

More generally, the problem of whether bilingual speakers display different “personalities” when speaking different languages has found some sporadic interest in the literature. While a more complete literature review of this debate is offered by Pavlenko (2006), some of the most influential contributions are summarised hereafter. In particular, the first, seminal study is Ervin (1964), which formulated eight predictions on the different verbal behaviour displayed by bilingual French and English speakers during the execution of a Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). In this type of test, pictures are shown and participants are told to tell a story explaining what is happening in the picture. In the case discussed by Ervin, the participants were tested
twice on the same pictures, first in French and then English. The predictions were that the speakers, while telling the story associated with the picture, will express the following: for women, greater achievement need in English; more emphasis on recognition by others in English; more domination by elders in French; more withdrawal and autonomy in French; more verbal aggression towards parents in English; more verbal aggression towards peers in French; more physical aggression in English; more guilt in French stories, and more frequent attempt to escape blame in English stories (1964:501). These predictions were all confirmed, although some more clearly than others. While discussing the conclusions, Ervin identified five possible explanations for these differences:

One explanation is that the subjects interpreted the instructions to speak in a particular language as an instruction to tell a story appropriate to that language [...] A second possibility is that language affects classification of stimuli and presumably recall of experience through the classification, and that bilinguals have systematically different recall of past experience in two languages[...] Third, the thematic differences may reflect the respective mass media [...] A fourth alternative is that the differences are not due merely to contrasts in the mass media, but to more pervasive differences in the verbal preoccupations and values expressed verbally in the two cultures[...] Finally [...] it is possible that a shift on language is associated with a shift in social roles and emotional attitudes. (1964:505-506)

The fourth alternative explanation, in other words, associates each language with some specific values that are more often expressed within that language than within the other one available to the bilingual, while the fifth one does the same with regard to social roles and emotional attitudes, for instance submission and the associated emotional attitude of feeling submissive. These last two putative explanations, then, seem the most relevant to the task of explaining the different behaviour of comedians performing in Italian and in English, given that the others refer to the stimulus / response mechanism (not relevant to stand-up comedy, which is mostly unprompted), to the selection of memory (not necessarily relevant to stand-up comedy, which is not always narrative and autobiographical) and to the role of the mass media (again, not necessarily relevant, although a modified version of this explanation will be suggested further on).

A possible objection to applying these putative explanations of the findings by Ervin (1964) to the realm of stand-up comedy is that they regard the content of the verbal behaviour, while Copstick’s observations are clearly related to the different forms of expression. A stronger
attention to these performative and pragmatic aspects of the bilingual “selves”, on the other hand, can be found in another important study in the field, Koven (1998), the conclusion to which contains the following remark, which remind us again of the performative nature of identity:

how French and Portuguese mediate these speakers’ different expressions and experiences of the self is not merely a question of what can be said in both but, rather, depends on the kinds of socioculturally recognized personas speakers can perform in each. The self is not so much labelled or described as it is enacted. (1998:437)

The difference between the realms, however, is not as big as it might first appear. Forms of expressions, just like contents, have a different value associated with them by a specific culture and, consequently, attributed to them by means of a specific language more often than by means of the other language available to the bilingual. In particular, Italian speakers have usually been associated with a very expressive and extrovert communication style, while English speakers, at least in England, have usually been associated with the quality of understatement. A hint to all this can be recognised in Copstick’s words:

One of the wonderful things about Italian conversation is it’s ‘Big’. You maybe say things twice or in three different ways. You just say more than you would in English. (Fleming 2014, online)

A similar point is raised by Katerina Vrana in the following passage from her interview:

GP – You are also a very physical performer. Did your body language change in the passage?

KV – Yes, I use hand gestures much more when I perform in Greek, it’s just the way people talk there, like it is for you Italians.

GP – So that happens regardless of the location, right? I mean, even if you are performing in Greek in Australia, for instance.

KV – Yes, it is associated with the language, not with the location of performance. (KV:2173-2178)

If that is the case, then it is hardly surprising that, when performing in a specific language, bilingual comedians will select the performance style that is most commonly associated with the
verbal performances in general for that specific language. Further corroboration can be found in the following passage from the interview with Magnus Bertnér:

GP – Apart from the different level of confidence, do you feel any difference between performing in English and in Swedish? For instance, do you see any difference in your performance style?

MB – Maybe I tend to “act out” more when I perform in English, but that might also be due to the gap in my confidence with regard to the two languages. (MB:1643-1647)

Contrary to what noticed with regard to Italian and Greek performers, then, Bertnér notices an increase, not a decrease, of gestural expressiveness when moving into his second language. If his own interpretation was corrected, i.e. if this gestural magnification was a way to counter-balance a lack of confidence when performing in a second language, the same would have been noticed in the other comedians interviewed, most of whom feel even less confident with their English than Bertnér, who reports growing up watching Eddie Izzard’s DVDs without any need for subtitles (MB:1740-1741). It seems more likely that the difference in the level of “acting out” might be explained with the passage into English from a language, Swedish, which, in this case, is probably associated with an even more understated expressivity.

A similar argument can be made with the more specific reference to what we might call comedy values. While English-speaking comedy, in fact, is nowadays a broad enough “church” to include all sorts of styles, in Italian “comicità all’inglese” (English-style comedy) is synonymous with deadpan comedy. The deadpan delivery style can be considered, then, the style most traditionally associated with English comedy. On the contrary, Italian comedy has been traditionally associated with a more physical and “overstated” style of delivery. Marinetti (2005), for one, reminds us of “the distinctive Italian tradition of accompanying humour with gesture” (2005:39), while the English tradition “is much more verbal and punning than gestural” (Ibid.).

These generalisations can be denounced as unwarranted or the result of preconceptions, but they are common and probably not devoid of some self-fulfilling power. By underlying some aspects over other in relation to different comedy traditions, they result in associating these

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70 Due to my lack of any linguistic competence with regard to the Swedish language, this interpretation is only based on non-scientific assumptions and should be taken as an invitation for more scientific corroboration or refutation.
traditions with different comedy values. When switching languages, we bilingual stand-up comedians, then, are also unconsciously switching between two different systems of evaluating our performance style and thus we are adapting, again consciously or not, our performance style accordingly. It is in this light that we can revise Ervin’s (1964) putative explanation about the role of mass media. As a provider of “role models” for verbal behaviour, the role of mass media is probably, in the case of bilingual stand-up comedians, replaced with the role played by the comedy canon associated with that language, i.e. with the experience of watching the native English-speaking comedians that are considered constitutive of that canon.

An extra factor to consider is that several studies in the literature have underlined an asymmetry in the emotional value associated with words and narratives expressed in a person’s first language as opposed to those expressed in other languages, with a wide consensus on the greater strength of the first. For instance, Schrauf & Durazo-Arvizu (2006) note that “when immigrants recall first language memories from childhood in a second language, some emotional intensity is lost” (2006:306). If the expression in a first language is more associated with emotion, then it is not a surprise that a stand-up comedy performance in the comedian’s first language will probably appear more “in colour” than one in the second, since this performance will reflect the comedian’s stronger emotional involvement. It would be very interesting to see what happens when a native English comedian starts performing in Italian in Italy: some factors (the selection of a performing style associated with a specific comedy scene; the different cultural value attributed to expressivity) would lead to predict a more expressive performance, while other (the weaker emotional association to words and narratives in a second language) would lead to predict a more detached one. This case, however, is not available in the sample considered for this study and this discussion needs to be left to further research.

Several authors (a review of the literature on the subject can be found in Pavlenko 2007, 168:175) have pointed out that the different level of emotional involvement is felt particularly strong with regard to the taboo words. Todorov (1994) reports on his own experience: “the multiplication table and curse words: those are about the only circumstances in which I cling to Bulgarian in France” (1994:213). The strength of taboo words in the second language is partially lost on the speaker, which might lead to a feeling of a greater freedom in using them, as reported by Giada Garofalo:
In English, I can say things that I would not feel free to say in Italian. I’m convinced that words, in fact, apart from their meaning, have values associated to them, which derive from the culture and the society in which they are used. You learn this by growing up in a place, so you are not really aware of these values in a second language and this makes you feel much freer. If I use a swear word in English, for instance, I don’t really “feel” the strength of that word. I might be intellectually aware of it, but I don’t “feel” it. If I do the same in Italian, there is a reaction inside me that is now “ingrained in me”\(^71\), it’s almost automatic, as if it was almost “genetic”, but which, of course, depends on the fact that we grew up with the idea that that word is “naughty”. (GG:54-62)

This difference in feeling is also consistent with my own experience, to the point that once I made this difference a source of comedy in itself. One of my shows included a routine on this very subject (I do not know if Giada’s reflections were influenced by it or if my routine was influenced by a previous utterance of these reflections; we probably just came independently to the same conclusions). The routine is structured as a mock scientific experiment, in which I call a volunteer from the audience, the only requirement for which being that he or she needs to be somebody for whom Italian is not the first language. I then ask them to read two words from a piece of paper. I then explain: “That is the most offensive expression in the Italian language. It’s a form of blasphemy and, even now, as an atheist, I cannot bring myself to utter those words without a pang of guilt. I really envy your freedom! On the other hand, I feel completely free to say…” and here I proceed to a barrage of utterances of the famed “C-word”, delivered in the most childish, playful and “guilt-free” way I can.

Summarising, all these observations seem to confirm the assertion of Koven (1998) that “languages are used not just to represent a unitary self but to enact different kind of selves” (1998:413). There is, however, another dimension to Kate Copstick’s words that needs to be explored and that is the evaluative dimension. Copstick, in fact, does not limit herself to saying that the performance of Italian-English bilingual comedians is different when performing in Italian, she is clearly also saying that it is “better”. One possible explanation is that comedy critics tend to value spontaneity and the ability to go “off script” and it has already been noted\(^72\) that bilingual comedians tend to be more scripted in their second language than in their first.

There are, however, more reasons for that preference. An important indication of what these reasons might be can be found in what Copstick says about the compère (presenter) for that night, Alex Martini:

\(^{71}\) In English in the original.
\(^{72}\) For instance in the course of the interview with Romina Puma.
Alex Martini (the compere) was terrific – great energy and quintessentially Italian – which is a GOOD thing. (Fleming 2014, online, original capitals)

These words, along with the knowledge that she speaks Italian, lived in Italy, is interested in all things Italian and, for that very reason, decided to attend a comedy night performed mostly in Italian, reveal Kate Copstick as an Italophile. Consequently, what she likes in the comedians performing in Italian can be seen as the fact that, unsurprisingly, they display more Italian characteristics (“a GOOD thing”, in her words) in that case than while performing in English. This points to another, essential dimension of bilingual and bicultural identity. While, in fact, “‘ways of speaking’ and social identities can dynamically conjure each other up” (Koven 1998:413, original double quotes replaced with single quotes), an equally important role needs also to be assigned to the “ways of listening”. As Koven himself points out: “the verbal expression of self is a matter of both production and reception” (1998:421). In other words, multilingual identity is as much in the ear of the listener as it is in the words of the speaker, it is the result of a negotiation between the, conscious or unconscious, expectations of the listener and the, conscious or unconscious, performing choices of the speaker. Kate Cosptick, after all, was there to see Italian comedians performing in Italian, so her stimuli were selected by that expectation.

Consistent with this view, some sort of paradoxical tension between the expectations of some members of the audience and us Italian comedians could often be detected at the London Puma nights. The few regular members of the audience who were not native Italian speakers, indeed, belonged to that aforementioned category of the Italophiles, who decided to learn Italian out of their love for Italy and the Italian culture. On the other hand, the immigrants’ emotions and attitudes towards their country of origin are, quite often, at least ambivalent. It is in this sense, for instance, that some prima facie surprising results found by Chiaro (2010) can be interpreted. Chiaro compares the reaction of first generation and second generation Italian immigrants in the US to jokes and adverts based on disparaging stereotypes. Against the initial working hypothesis that “the closer to the culture and the more Italian the informant, the more he or she would be irritated by such humorous discourse” (2010:67), Chiaro found that first generation immigrants react more positively to this type of jokes and adverts. Among the possible explanation for this, Chiaro mentions the fact that “the first generation know that they are foreigners and it is this which possibly enables them to feel a certain amount of respect towards the host culture” (2010:79), while the second generation “are more likely to see such
humour as a barrier to being fully accepted as citizens, something they desire more intensely than their parents who may still possess the myth of return” (2010:80).

To all these possible explanations, a further one can be added (which is the converse of the more positive attitude towards the host culture): a more negative attitude towards the culture of origin. To clarify with an example, Chiaro says about the disorganisation stereotype that “it may well be the cliché containing most truth” (2010:76). As Allport (1954) noted, indeed “some stereotypes are totally unsupported by the facts; others develop from a sharpening and overgeneralization of the facts” (1954:190). It is also to be noted that disorganisation is a category that applies not to individuals but to systems, meaning in this case not to the Italians, wherever in the world they might reside, but to Italy itself as the country of origin. Consequently, if the disorganisation stereotype is really grounded on how things actually work in Italy, a joke based on it will probably trigger in the first generation immigrants both a) the recognition of something still directly experienced by them when in Italy and b) the relief of having left that reality behind. Jokes that disparage the country of origin, in other words, can be perceived as vindicating the decision to emigrate. Both this experience of recognition and this feeling of vindication are probably felt in a particularly strong way the first generation of immigrants, which makes it an explanation consistent with the difference observed (although its corroboration requires further empirical research).

If this is the case, then it is not difficult to understand the conflict of expectations and behaviours that can often been observed, during the London Puma comedy nights, between those in the audience who have chosen the Italian culture to the point of learning the language and the Italian performers, who have instead decided to move somewhere else. The clearly paradoxical nature of this conflict means that it can easily be exploited for comic reasons. As an example, I can quote one of my own jokes: “Yeah, I know you Italophiles, with a villa in Tuscany; you keep asking us how we could leave such a beautiful country, while we were working in Cologno Monzese” (a town outside Milan made mainly of nondescript office blocks). The joke is delivered in Italian, and as such is understood by both the Italians and the Italophiles, but the reference to Cologno Monzese is likely to be recognised by the former only. This way, a privileged communication channel is established with the Italians in the audience, allowing the joke to be one in which the Italian comedian laughs with the Italians at the Italophiles. As Goffman (1981) noted:
An element of humorous “class warfare” (a very common ingredient of comedy in Britain) can also be detected, since the contrast expressed by this joke is mainly based on the difference between the privileged experience of spending in Italy somebody’s free time, on one hand, and the compromises required by “making a living” there, on the other. Even more to the point are jokes in which the Italian comedians declare their fatigue vis-a-vis aspects of Italian culture, such as the importance given to food and fashion, which are normally seen in a positive light. Here is an example, taken again from my own jokes: “I come from Milan, as you can see I’m a fashion refugee”. This tension, then, seems to originate from the conflict between the expectation of otherness, projected by the members of the host cultural onto the members of the peripheral culture (an expectation that, paradoxically, seems to be stronger the stronger is the “liking” felt by these members for that specific peripheral culture) with the desire for integration that is often felt by the members of the peripheral community themselves. A similar conflict can be detected in this passage from the interview with participant Katsura Sunshine, a Canadian-born bilingual (English and Japanese) performer of the traditional Japanese “sit-down comedy” form Rakugo:

KS – [...] People keep asking me, either, if it is tough for me to be the only foreign Rakugo storyteller, or, if I have any advantages in being the only foreign Rakugo storyteller. And I reply “no” on both counts, or at least less than you would expect. When people didn’t know me and saw me walking on the stage with my dyed blond hair, they first though: “ooohhh”. But that maybe lasted thirty seconds or a minute and after that minute I still have 50 minutes in which I could make people laugh.

GP – On that subject, why the dyed blond hair?

KS – It was my master’s idea. When he named me “Sunshine” he told me to dye my hair blond. The reason is that we were doing something that sometimes happen in Rakugo shows, which consists in getting six or seven performers on stage at the same time and you playing word games. It was part of my master’s show, which the master and five apprentices, including me, were touring at that time. My master is very famous, so we were performing in theatres of 2000 or 2500 capacity. There was a point when we were kneeling like this [he mimics bowing towards to audience to the effect that only the top of his head was visible
to them], with the result that people far away could not see that I was a foreigner, so part of the impact was lost. In order to maximise the impact, then, my master asked me to dye my hair blond. (KS:1587-1602)

While Katsura Sunshine always wears a kimono, even off-stage, the intent of his master seems to be that of “foreignising” him, i.e. of overplaying his status as a foreigner. The context is that of improvised wordplay, a notoriously difficult activity for a non-native performer, so it is not clear whether the master’s intention was raising his disciple’s status, by making his achievements look even more remarkable as coming from a foreigner, or lowering it, by presenting his mistakes as something you can naturally expect from a “funny foreigner”. These two aspects, of course, are not mutually exclusive: everybody who has witnessed an improvised show (or a session of Karaoke, which of course also originated in Japan) knows that the enjoyment of it derives its source not only from the performers’ achievements but also from their often unintentionally comical failures. The line between “making people laugh with” and “having people laugh at” is not always that clear for the migrant performer, the drawing of which is the result of a negotiation with the audience and the other players, such as the MC (in stand-up comedy) or the master storyteller (in Rakugo).

More generally, the role played by humour in the relationships between immigrant and host communities has been the subject of many studies. Martineau (1972) represents a particularly systematic attempt to draw a map of all the possible interactions. The main elements of his model are: the actor (the comedian, in this case), the audience, the internal structure of the group (in particular, whether the actor belongs or not to the same group as the audience), the ingroup and outgroup that can constitute the subject of the humour and, finally, the esteem and disparagement judgements that are expressed towards these subjects. From the various combinations of these elements, Martineau derives a theory of the different functions played by humour in the different situations.

In the case of the London Puma, some interactions can be indeed read along the lines of these functions. The construction of the ingroup is described by Luca Cupani:

[…] I think that at the London Puma there is a strong identification between us performers and the audience due to the fact that we are all Italians who migrated to London. I think this is what defines us as a “group”, in fact the first question from the MC is always about how long people have been living in London for. (LC:774-777)
In terms of the possible attitudes towards the outgroup, Martineau summarises:

When the humour is judged as disparaging the outgroup, it may function in two ways discussed as follows. 1) To increase morale and solidify the ingroup; 2) To introduce or foster a hostile disposition towards the outgroup. (1972:118-119)

The first function is recognisable at play, for instance, in a routine performed by Alex Martini on 20 November 2014, in which he disparaged the British political system as harbouring cases of sexual misbehaviour “as serious as those of Berlusconi”. The disparagement of the outgroup, in this case, had the likely effect of increasing the morale of the ingroup by offering a partial retribution for years of disparagement suffered by the Italians in London due to of the well-known frolics of their then Prime Minister. Moreover, as Asimakoulas (2013) argues, even *prima facie* self-disparaging humour can have as its hidden target “the hypocrisy, hierarchical structures and destructive disposition of majorities” (2013:5) that it satirises.

In other cases, though, it is the very delimitation of the ingroup that becomes problematic. A clear example is offered by humour that is directed towards Italy as a country, as opposed to the Italians as an ethnic group. Both the comedians and the audience, in fact, are Italians who live abroad, so this kind of humour can either be seen as self-deprecating, since Italy is the common country of origin, or as disparaging the outgroup of the Italians who live in Italy. In the latter case, as was briefly suggested before, this kind of humour might play the role of increasing the morale of the ingroup of the Italians in London, reassuring them that, by leaving Italy, they made the right decision. Conversely, this very decision, and the ingroup that is defined by it, can itself be the subject of self-deprecating humour, as seems to be the case when Giada Garofalo, on 20 November 2014, addressed some members of the audience by saying: “Ah, you have been living in England only a couple of months, I see... now I understand why you still look so cheerful!”.

In discussing the sometimes-fuzzy nature of the ingroup / outgroup delimitation lines, it might be useful to note that this fuzziness might in some cases have its roots “at home”. Out of the four Italian comedians who performed at the London Puma for more than one year (Romina Puma, Giada Garofalo, Alex Martini and myself), three (the exception is Alex Martini) were brought up in Northern Italy (in the case of Puma, after spending the first years of her life in Germany) by Southern Italian parents. Given the deep cultural differences, and sometimes tensions, between Northern Italy and Southern Italy, it is probably not an exaggeration to say
that this marked the three of us as “second generation migrants” in our home country, even before the identity lines were made even fuzzier by migration to the UK. Indeed, Matteo Andreone, founder of Milan’s comedy school Accademia del comico, told me (personal communication, April 2017) a version of the joke on Jewish assimilation reported above in which it is the Southern Italians in Milan who try to integrate with comic results\textsuperscript{73}. It is an intriguing suggestion, although difficult to corroborate empirically, that this condition might have stimulated in us the desire to develop a comic stance and persona, which would explain the statistical anomaly. Another possibility, though, is that this condition might be associated with a weaker sense of belonging to our cities and regions of origin, which in turn made it easier for us to move to London. This latter interpretation could be verified by making a comparison with the statistical frequency of second generation internal migrants among the Italian diaspora in general, which of course is beyond the limits of the present study.

6.4 A specific case of audience reaction: the perception of taboo violation

According to the examples discussed in the previous sections, the observation of bilingual comedy reveals not only that identity is constructed through performance, but also that performances are interpreted from the point of view of the receivers’ expectations about identity, through a process of constant negotiation. The discussion on the perception of taboo words, for instance, was conducted from the point of view of the feelings of the performer, but will need to be complemented by consideration of how the taboo factor is perceived by the audience and how this was affected by the perception of the bilingual performer’s identity.

Another participant to this study, Luca Cupani, found himself apparently and unknowingly violating a perceived taboo during his first performance in English in the UK. The occasion was the famed King Gong competition at London’s Comedy Store\textsuperscript{74}, which Cupani won, but, in his

\textsuperscript{73} “Two terroni [disparaging term for Southern Italians] in Milan, father and son, are told that to become real Milanese they need to swim across the Naviglio [a canal in Milan]. The father goes first, swims across the canal, climbs out of and starts speaking in perfect Milanese. The son, then, follows the father’s example, but when he’s trying to climb out the canal, the father kicks him back in, shouting: ‘Die, terrone, die!’”. It is not a surprise that this, nastier, version of the joke targeting people from my own background had never before been told to my face, so to speak, although in this case too it can be interpreted as targeting the racism of the native Milanese.

\textsuperscript{74} The King Gong show, which represents the only chance for new comedians to perform at the prestigious Comedy Store, follows the formula of the “gong show”: comedians are given a maximum of five minutes to perform, while three members of the audience are given a red card and are instructed to raise it when they think the comedian should leave the stage. When all of three cards are raised, usually by responding to the reactions from the rest of the audience, such as “boooing”, a gong is banged and the comedian leaves the stage. If the comedian survives the five minutes without being “gonged off” is said to have “beaten the gong” and plays an extra minute in a final round against the other “surviving” comedians. The comedian who does the strongest extra minute is declared the winner of the night. There are other gong shows in the UK comedy scene, but the one at London’s Comedy Store is considered the toughest, not only because of the size of the room and of the famed “viciousness” of its audience, but also because the rules do not guarantee any minimum performance time, so comedians can be “gonged off”.
words, “by making jokes I can’t do any longer since they are considered racist” (LC:640). Asked to provide an example, Cupani elaborates as follows:

LC – [...] I joked about those adverts, on the tube, for pancreas cancer awareness, which tell you that one of the symptoms was that your skin becomes yellow, so my joke was: “There was a Chinese person next to me who looked very worried”. Another comedian told me that it was “very racist”, because associating the concept of “being Chinese” with the concept of “being yellow” was like using the “N-word” with regard to a black person! In the set, that joke was actually followed by me telling the hypothetical Chinese person: “Don’t worry, maybe you would become pink”. So was I racist by calling myself “pink” too? On that night the joke worked, although I must admit that the audience who go to the Comedy Store on gong show nights with the clear intention of booing the acts off stage are probably not the most “politically correct” of all audiences. After my set, the MC commented that I demonstrated that being racist is acceptable if you are a foreigner. Maybe that was a bit racist in itself, as if racism was something you could automatically expect from an Italian. (LC:643-653)

Asked whether he used that punch line again, Cupani replied:

LC – Yes, in one of those gigs in which the audience is mainly constituted by other comics, I got an “ooooooohhh” as a reaction and, afterwards, three or four other comedians came to tell me that I shouldn’t do that joke any longer. (LC:662-664)

The situation described by Cupani is paradoxical. On one hand, his punch line was clearly well received by the audience of the Comedy Store, as it is shown from the video (Cupani 2014, online) and from the fact that he won the audience-judged competition. On the other, he was reproached as “racist” by the MC, who also seemed to express a judgement on the audience’s appreciation of the joke. According to Barker & Galasiński (2001:64), the uncovering of this type of contradictions and dilemmas is one of the main aims of the methodological approach which, along with many other authors, they call Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Just as importantly, “analysis should avoid easy, dichotomous explanations of the phenomena studied” (2001:64). In this specific case, this means avoiding the temptation of discussing whether Cupani’s joke “is” or “is not” racist. On the other hand, an analysis of the conditions, the modalities and the agents involved in the attribution of this value judgement might be productive in uncovering the

from the very first seconds. Luca Cupani won the night with his very first performance in comedy, an achievement that gained him an almost astonished recognition from the other comedians.

75 A literature review on the nature of racist discourse and on its relationship with comedy is offered by Pérez (2013).
agents, motivations and ideologies involved in this exchange. Indeed, one of the tools illustrated by Barker & Galasiński (2001) for the pursuit of the aims of a critical approach is the analysis of the *interpersonal function* of discourse, based on the recognition that “[c]ommunication is not only about representational effects, for it also encompasses all that language does to express social and personal relations” (2001:75). Of particular importance is the analysis of how discourse is used to construct *ideologies*, defined as “structures of signification which constitute social relations in and through power” (2001:66). The analysis of the power relations involved, then, assumes great importance in any attempt to a critical understanding of a specific discourse situation.

In this specific case, the main agents involved at the Comedy Store are: the comedian, the MC and the audience. Starting from the comedian, his status and authority have been the subject of conflicting interpretations. Mintz (1985), for instance, underlines the marginality of the stand-up comedian, who offers himself or herself as a “negative exemplar” (1985:74), who is typically laughed at (Ibid.). On the other hand, Yus (2002), among many others, underlines how “on other occasions the comedian does control what is said, how it is said, and how much interaction he or she feels like having with the audience” (2002:10). It seems, then, that any generalisation on the status and authority enjoyed by the comedian in the discourse exchange should be avoided and an analysis of the specific power relations in a specific situation should be attempted instead. In this case, the exchange happened during a competition open to new comedians who want to “have a shot” at the prestigious Comedy Store. The situation itself, then, projects a low status over the comedian who is taking part to the competition, who almost appears as a “beggar” at the gates of a prestigious institution, who as such cannot be a “chooser” with regard to the very harsh rules of the competition itself. These rules, in turn, bestow on the audience the power to determine the comedian’s “life” or “death”, at least in comedic terms. The audience’s appreciation of Cupani’s “Chinese joke”, then, should represent the last word in deciding the acceptability of that joke. Cupani himself seems to suggest this interpretation:

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LC – [...] The beauty of comedy is that punishments and rewards are immediate: you can see straight away if a joke works or doesn’t work. If you can make people laugh, that’s it, it means that the connection worked [...].
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There was, however, a third agent in the exchange: the MC. As the only professional comedian in a new acts night and the only regular performer at the Comedy Store, the MC clearly enjoys a higher status over the comedians taking part in the competition. Moreover, as a member of the
same community the competitors are competing to enter, he plays the role of the gatekeeper, who sanctions the perceived violations to the rules of that community. In this case, he found himself in a dilemmatic situation: on one hand, in his role of gatekeeper he needs to sanction the perceived violation, on Cupani’s part, of the “no racist jokes” rule; on the other, he should avoid a conflict with the audience, on which the rules of the competition bestow the greatest authority. In Luca’s words, this dilemma was solved by the MC explaining the audience’s positive reaction as proving that “being racist is acceptable if you are a foreigner” (GG:660).

In order to understand what goes on in this move, a useful theoretical tool is offered by Yus’ (2002;2016) study on the different possible permutations in the relationship between the stand-up comedians’ beliefs expressed in their performances and the beliefs of the audience. In particular, Yus distinguishes between beliefs that are directly held intuitively by the audience members and those that, instead, are metarepresentational, which follow a schema that “it is believed in this culture / society that $p$” (2002:4). In Yus’ own example of the perception of sex roles, a person might at the same time hold the direct belief that men and women should enjoy equal opportunities and a metarepresentational belief that the current culture / society grants women more limited opportunities. Rhetoric persuasion and moral education, then, are instances in which you “disquote the content of the communication from the belief that has been communicated and believe this content directly” (Sperber 1997, quoted in Yus, 2002:4). In the Comedy Store situation, then, the MC performed the opposite manoeuvre: the (supposedly “racist”) direct belief that “the Chinese are yellow”, which was positively sanctioned with laughter by the audience, was reframed as a metarepresentational belief on what “foreigners” believe about the Chinese. The target of the joke, then, is redefined as consisting not in the Chinese population (in the MC’s interpretation of the joke as racist) nor in the silliness of the tube’s advert (as was probably Cupani’s intention), but in Cupani’s own supposed ignorance, as a foreigner, of the rules of British comedic discourse. This way, the MC can at the same time enforce the rules of the community to which he plays the role of the gatekeeper, and avoid a direct criticism of the audience, who are now re-framed as laughing not with Cupani but at him.

Goffman (1974), although with reference to scripted theatre, explains this reference in terms of different roles played by the audience:

Laughter by members of the audience in sympathetic response to an effective bit of buffoonery by a staged character is clearly distinguished on both sides of the stage line from audience laughter that can greet an actor who flubs, trips, or
breaks up in some unscripted way. In the first case the individual laughs as an onlooker, in the second as a theatregoer. (1974:130)

In the situation of a stand-up comedy performance, in which it is not clear to the audience which parts are scripted and which are not (the scripted / unscripted distinction, in other words, is not part of the stand-up comedy frame, regardless of whether the comedian does or does not use scripts), the distinction between these two types of laughter becomes more problematic. This allows the MC to re-frame the audience’s laughter from one type to the other by means of his comment. In particular, the audience response is now re-framed as laughter at Cupani’s clumsiness in ignoring / violating the rules of the very gated community he is trying to access with his performance. The audience is then, so to speak, recruited by the MC in his mission of rule enforcing and a laughter response that might have had an element of “guilty pleasure” in it (or, more properly, as will soon be discussed, of “benign violation”) is re-interpreted as the disparagement humour response to a supposed non-benign violation. Conversely, the transfer of taboo-based humour might fail because no violation is perceived, benign or otherwise, as participant Katerina Vrana reports in her interview with reference to one of her solo shows:

With regard to *Let’s talk about sex*, some parts in the UK are not shocking and hence not funny, while in Greece they are shocking and so they are funny. (KV:2133-2135)

On the other hand, in other cases Vrana clashed against the opposite problem

KV – [...] Here in the UK, for instance, the word “dick” is not necessarily offensive, but in Greek the equivalent is “poutsa”, which is considered very offensive.

GP – Don’t you have a range of different words, with a different grade of offensiveness?

KV – Yes, but they are all very heavy. I developed my sex-themed show in English, so when I first did it in Greek, for the first couple of performances there was awkward silence, because I hadn’t worked out yet what the taboo bits were. I didn’t know what parts built up tension and what parts released it, while I know it now. (KV: 2242-2249)

Taboos, then, can both represent a problem for the performer and an opportunity. What seems to make a real difference is the awareness, or the lack of awareness, from the performer of where the taboo lines are drawn.
Another case in which the transfer fails is reported by Romina Puma in the following passage of her interview:

GP – And then, if I remember well, you developed, in English, some material about your disability, which you performed in Italy and found that the audience were shocked, right?

RP – Oh, God, you can definitely say that! I must say that it was material that had also worked well in Italian in front of the London Puma audience, which is constituted mostly of Italians, but Italians who have been exposed to the English-speaking comedy culture. They know what they can expect and what they are allowed to laugh at. As you know, in fact, there are many disabled comedians on the UK circuit and they all talk a lot about their disability. In Italy, instead, there is no disabled comedian, at least to my knowledge, and the argument is very much taboo. I tried that material in two places and I got completely different reactions. When I tried it at the Laboratori Zelig it was like, to quote one Giada Garofalo’s jokes, experiencing a reverse tsunami [she mimics people performing a very deep intake of breath]. The funny thing was that I could see the audience, since the lights weren’t that low, and I could see that they were repressing their laughter. They were probably thinking: “I can’t laugh at that!” But I was talking about my disability in a comedy club, it was clear to me that I was giving them the authorisation to laugh! You know, one thing that happens quite often in Italy is that the audience replace laughing with applauding. When I was given feedback about the performance (in those Zelig nights, in fact, as well as the pre-performance rehearsals and suggestions, you also get post-performance feedback from the autore) I was told that it was like the applause you hear sometimes at funerals during the passage of the coffin! Not the reaction you want in a comedy night! I think it happened because it was a type of audience used to a completely different kind of comedy. (RP:518-537)

How much disability represents a socially acceptable topic of discourse might be related to cultural attitudes that can be detected in society, as Katerina Vrana suggests with reference to Greece:

GP – You mentioned that mental issues and disabilities are a taboo topic in Greece. Would you like to elaborate?

KV – Yes, in Greece disabled people do not go out much, they are often kept indoor because they are a bit of a shame for the family. (KV:2238-2242)

In the passage from Puma quoted above, however, a different theme seems to emerge: the difference between the perception of taboo in two different comedy clubs within the same
country / culture. Several authors, most famously Bakhtin ([1985] 1965) with his notion of the *carnivalesque*, have underlined how comic discourse allows for a temporary suspension, or even reversal, of the rules that otherwise regulate a specific society / culture. More recently, McGraw & Warren (2010) have proposed their *benign violation* theory of humour, according to which, as the name suggests, the perception of humour is associated with the experience of a violation of a norm that, for various possible reasons, is also perceived as benign. What these theories need to be complemented with, however, is the recognition the comic discourse is itself governed by its own rules, which can, in turn, be violated, in a way that is not always perceived as “benign”. For instance, while Cupani’s supposed racist joke still produced a positive response in the audience, Puma seemed to experience a conflict with the audience expectations of what subjects are appropriate for comedy: hers was not a violation of the rules of the society enclosing the space of comic discourse, made benign by the special status attributed to the latter, but a violation of the rules of comic discourse itself. There was no need of a re-framing intervention from the MC for this violation to be perceived as such. As her second experience suggests, however, these rules can vary within the same country / culture. This seems to be particularly true for Italy, where the mainstream comedy scene is now challenged by an emerging alternative scene, which models itself on the local interpretation of Anglo-American stand-up comedy.

In contrast, what made Cupani’s supposed violation perceived as benign by the audience was, probably among other factors, his status of being a foreigner, as the MC was ready to point out: just like children, foreigners “say the funniest things” because of their (real, feigned or simply supposed) ignorance of the rules of what can or cannot be said in the situation at hand. The relationship between the comedian’s point of a view and the point of view of the outsider has been discussed, among others, by Koziski (1984), who compares the stand-up comedian to the anthropologist, with whom he or she shares the task to make explicit what is implicit within a culture. At the same time, Koziski contrasts the anthropologist as a *sympathetic outsider*, who tries to make the unfamiliar understandable by reaching a certain level of familiarity with it, with the stand-up comedian as a *cynical insider*, who suspends his familiarity with his or her own culture in order to show it in its full comic absurdity, as if seen for the first time. This analogy resonates with my own experience: the first piece of comic writing I ever did in the UK was, indeed, a fake anthropological study of the (to me puzzling) British tradition of the corporate Christmas party. At the same time, however, this personal experience underlines a possible problem with Koziski’s theory: he seems to assume that the stand-up comedian is always an
When the stand-up comedian is a foreigner, however, a wider choice of roles seems to be open to him or her. These include the *cynical outsider*, who does not understand the host culture and/or compares it unfavourably with his or her own (in case of Italian comedians in the UK, this attitude is usually associated with talking about food). Another option open to the foreign comedian seems to be that of the *sympathetic outsider* (the same role that Koziski seems to consider reserved for the anthropologist only), who is fascinated by all that is positively different in the host culture and tries to embrace it, maybe with comically mixed results. Indeed, it is from this outsider’s point of view that foreign comedians might derive their own comic sensitivity, as was beautifully observed by philosopher Horace Kallan more than a century ago:

> [...] the traveller who can laugh finds all things in a new country ludicrous at the beginning. Customs and modes, habits of life and manners, the very scenery move him to laughter. But as his stay is prolonged, the disharmonies seem to rub off; the articulation of life becomes smoother and less noisy. He himself has now become, to some degree, a part of the structure; speech, manners, dress, his own have somehow become confluent with them, have set him at their centre, where he once was at the periphery. He can no longer laugh; nor can he understand his original laughter. (Kallan 1911:152)

In this sense, the position of the foreign comedian is privileged. Puma, on the other hand, was in a less favourable situation: while, after years of performing in the UK, she was a *de facto* foreigner in terms of her familiarity with the rules of the Italian comedic scene, her being an Italian in Italy probably contributed to her supposed “violation” being perceived as less “benign” than it would have been otherwise. As Todorov (1994) noticed, when faced with the choice of whether he should defend his cosmopolitan worldview (developed during his life in France) in front of a Bulgarian audience concerned with defending their nation identity against a powerful neighbour:

> Tough I am French and Bulgarian at the same time, I can only be in Paris or Sofia at any given moment. Ubiquity is not yet within my reach. The tenor of my remarks is too dependent upon their place of utterance for my whereabouts to be irrelevant. (1994:211)

Bilingual and bicultural comedians might see themselves as sharing this double identity, but self-perception can sometimes clash with the unavoidable uniqueness of location and the simplicity of the expectations associated with it.
6.5 Conclusions

In conclusion to this chapter, the performance of language, exemplified in the act from a bilingual comedian of delivering a stand-up comedy set in a specific language, represents an important part of the performative enacting of identity. Indeed, performance is the performative act made visible and, more specifically, comic performance of ethnic identity is its performative act revealed in its dilemmatic and paradoxical nature. Performances, moreover, are always acted for an audience and can only be understood with reference to the expectations of the audience and the way these expectations are met or challenged. Comedy from bilingual performers, particularly when they move not only between languages but also across different cultures and comedy scenes, offers a precious opportunity to observe identity negotiation at work. Conversely, the dynamics of this negotiation need to be taken into account when discussing oral self-translation of stand-up comedy, in particular when discussing the conditions for its success or the reasons for its failure. While this study has been trying to counteract the tendency, in the literature on stand-up comedy, to underplay the importance of its text, it also recognises that this text can only be delivered in performance and that, in turn, performance can only happen in the space of interaction between performers and their audience.
7 Concluding remarks and research outlook

In the present study, the phenomenon of stand-up comedians performing in more than one language has been discussed not only for its relevance as an emerging cultural phenomenon, but also, and more importantly, as a testbed for observing and discussing a broad range of issues. In doing so, the discussion has followed a path that can be described as proceeding from the individual to the social perspective: from the suggestion of a mental text of stand-up comedy to the effects of language choice on performance and on the social negotiation of identity between audience and performer. In this concluding section, this path will be summarised to identify what results have been achieved and what, instead, might require further investigation.

The first of the research questions addressed by this study, and introduced in Chapter 1, is whether any translation activity, and of what type, could be recognised as taking place in the activity of bilingual stand-up comedy (RQ1). The answer to the first part of the question was affirmative, in the light of the definition of translation introduced in Chapter 2 and on the methodological approach described in Chapter 3. What proved to be more problematic was answering the second part of the question, related to the nature of this translation. As was noted in Chapter 1, the terminology and conceptual apparatus of both Translation Studies and Interpreting Studies was developed to account for the translation of written texts, in the former case, or with the oral translation of ephemeral verbal productions, in the latter. The case of orally self-translating stand-up comedians, instead, seems to represent an almost paradoxically situation. Indeed, what is translated is something that clearly appears to be not completely ephemeral, but this something is not written. As often happens with the emergence of paradoxes, a possible approach could have been to deny any legitimacy to one of the terms of the antinomy, hence preventing the paradox from arising at all. Stand-up comedians always talk about “writing” material, so, it might have been argued, there must be a written text hidden somewhere, so to speak, maybe in the notes used by the performers or in the scripts of their performances. However, this study has shown – particularly in Chapter 2 – that this attempt to prevent the paradox from arising at all is not successful. Indeed, notes are often partial, scripts are often left out of date with the development of the performances, none is intended for an audience or show cohesion and coherence, and either of them can be totally absent. Anecdotally, this objection that stand-up comedy performances should, after all, rely on a
“hidden” written text was never advanced by the stand-up comedians themselves. People who perform stand-up comedy seem to know that something different is taking place. Extrapolating this implicit knowledge, making it explicit and expressing in theoretically sound terms has been, indeed, one of the aims of this study.

The other way of preventing the paradox from arising / occurring would have been to accept the unwritten nature of stand-up comedy, but to reduce it to pure improvisation. This study has shown many cases in which the careful search for the right wording was clearly pursued from the comedians in advance to the performance and in order to achieve a certain degree of repeatability, even in the monolingual perspective. It was clear, then, that preventing the paradox from arising was not possible: indeed, something seems be constant in stand-up comedy, but, at the same time, that something is not written.

The question of whether translation takes place at all in the case of bilingual stand-up comedians seemed to underpin this dilemma. The terminology through which translation is usually described, such as the expressions “source text” and “target text”, is entrenched in the world of the written page. If an oral form of translation is possible at all, then making sense of it requires a notion of “text” that can account for the (relative) stability of what is translated (and what it is translated into). At the same time, this role cannot be played by the traditional written text. The problem of whether bilingual stand-up comedians perform translation, then, both highlights the dilemma described above and can only be tackled if that dilemma is solved. Bilingual stand-up comedians who participated to this study did describe their activity as “translation”, but even their own perception could only appear consistent once the notion of translation was expanded to include unwritten texts. Oral self-translation, then, appeared to represent a phenomenon which, both for the participants and the researcher, first needed to be defined in order to be detected. This study has offered a contribution to that definition. While developed to provide an account of a specific phenomenon, the applicability of this notion of oral self-translation goes beyond it. Future research will hopefully explore this applicability.

In the attempt to articulate this notion, a significant development was the application to it of the notion of mental text, which allows for it to be thought in terms of source and target without at the same time implying the presence of a written text. This theoretical move was made possible by the recognition that the type of translation which takes place in bilingual stand-up comedy is not only oral translation, but more specifically oral self-translation. As such,
it does not pose the “opacity of other minds” problem that the idea of a translation of somebody else’s mental text would have inevitably raised.

The challenge, then, was to try to understand what this mental text could entail. The notion was first introduced in Chapter 3 as a “black box”, i.e. was postulated as a mere placeholder for the source and target in oral self-translation, but in Chapter 4 a look inside this black box was attempted by means of applying to the notion of mental text concepts borrowed from established theories of memory. The notion of “declarative memory” and “procedural memory” were identified as particularly useful to make sense of that duality between relative repeatability and relative spontaneity that can be perceived in stand-up comedy. More generally speaking, the fact that the notion of mental text was initially developed to make sense of phenomena which are apparently very different from stand-up comedy, such as the performances of singers on the Silk Road (Honko 1996), suggests that – just as for the notion of oral self-translation - any effort to develop and refine this notion can have far-reaching consequences beyond stand-up comedy: lecturing, teaching, storytelling and political public speaking are examples of activities that might be better understood in this light. Future avenues of enquiry might also include seeking a better understanding of how the mental text of oral performances can be stored in memory. Given its focus on translation, this study has inevitably privileged the declarative part of the mental text, which is the consciously recallable part and, as such, the part which is the object of conscious translation. A fascinating avenue of inquiry would, then, consist of investigating the skills that underpin the most unpredictable aspects of performance, such as improvisations and asides. This study also suggested that the procedural part of the mental text included the memorisation of skills that are not generic skills of verbal production, but are specific to a series of performances and which, as such, are properly part of its text. For instance, the way a specific punch line is embodied through gestures and facial expressions, or the way it is allowed to vary according to the specific circumstances. In other words, a hypothesis which calls for future verification is that the capacity to improvise might not only represent a generic skill, but might also be specific. For example, there might be a specific range of improvised behaviours associated with a specific punch line. This type of investigation might require the careful examination and comparison of video performances, to identify (even in the monolingual perspective) what is constant and what is changeable in this part of the mental text. Although suggested by the theoretical apparatus of proposed in this study, these avenues of inquiry go beyond its remit.
An aspect of bilingual comedy performance, the discussion of which has, instead, found space in study, is that bilingual comedians do seem to perform differently according to the language of performance, which responds to RQ3\textsuperscript{76}. The reasons why this happens seem to be multiform. On one hand, performers do feel differently when performing in their native language or in their second language, for instance regarding the perceived emotional charge of words, which is in line with the findings in the field of psycholinguistics. Moreover, different expectations of behaviour might be associated with the different languages (for instance: more extrovert in Italian, more introvert in English). Finally, there might also be at play an implicit association between a specific language and the values traditionally embodied in a comedy tradition (more gestural and expressive in Italian, more verbal and deadpan in English).

If how performers “feel” about their own performance is important, it is also important to recognise that it is not the performers themselves who are the final receivers and judges of their performances, but their audiences. It is with this recognition that the next aspect of oral self-translation mentioned in this study’s title, i.e. interaction, started to reveal its importance. Indeed, performances in each language are associated with a series of values and expectations that are the result as much of the audiences’ attitude towards that language as of the performers’ own attitudes to it. Moreover, language is just one dimension of this exchange of expectations and projections, in which the perceived nationality of the performer also plays, among other factors, a particularly important role. Thus, the reception of the comedian’s performance becomes part of a complex identity negotiation between the performers and their audiences. This offers a link to RQ4, which concerns the implication of bilingual comedy for social interaction. Building on the participants’ insistence on the importance of the specific (target) comedy scene, this study has contributed to the understanding of how comedy translatability cannot be discussed with exclusive reference to linguistic content alone, but needs to take in consideration the conditions of its productions.

In turn, these conditions of production, even when recognised in existing literature, are often identified with the target nation or culture as a whole. Yet what became increasingly apparent in the present study is the importance of the specific sub-system of the “comedy scene” within this national cultural system or, if Even-Zohar’s terminology is adopted here, of a specific system within the polysystem. This was particularly evident in the case of Italy, with reference to which participants described two very different comedy scenes, the one described as “mainstream” \textsuperscript{76} In a change to the “natural” order, RQ2 is discussed below.
and the emerging stand-up scene, often described as “alternative”. Conversely, it might also be possible to identify comedy scenes that span across the borders of nations and cultures, for instance international stand-up comedy in English. Indeed, Francesco De Carlo of Comedy sans Frontières declared that he did not feel the need to make any changes to his performances between Berlin and Moscow, as if he was moving within the same system. This represents, again, an avenue of research that might deserve future exploration.

Most of the participants to this study, however, were not global players such as De Carlo, but members of a diaspora community, specifically that of the Italians in London. The importance of humour in the specific identity negotiation required by the diasporic condition has been recognised in the literature (see, for instance, Asimakoulas 2013), with the present study hopefully offering a contribution to that ongoing line of research. Where this study seems, instead, to suggest a new line of enquiry is, again, in the recognition that comedy is an activity that articulates itself in a multiplicity of systems, even within the same nation, culture and language. The question that arises is whether diaspora comedy also represents a separate system like international comedy. If this is the case, what relationships this system interacts with the mainstream comedy system of the host community. Indeed, along with migration, i.e. the movement of people, translation itself, i.e. the movement of words, can also play an important role in the establishment of systems. A prime example of this is the case where, as was clearly the case when the availability of comedy “fansubs” in Italian played a role in the establishment of the Italian stand-up comedy scene. How these two movements are intertwined with each other can be the subject of yet another future avenue of enquiry.

Finally, the question of the comedic effectiveness of this translation (RQ2) intersects with all these concerns: it depends on the identity negotiation between performer and audience, on the performer’s success in adapting to the rules of the comedy system and on the way the target language impacts on their performance style, in addition to considerations which are more traditional, so to speak, to the debate on humour translatability, such as the importance of cultural reference adaptations and of wordplay (re)creation or suppression. Moreover, the double fluidity offered by oral self-translation, in which the natural fluidity of oral communication meets the authorial freedom of the self-translator, also seems to play an important role in the perception, shared by all the participants to this study, that their translations are felicitous. After all, according to the relief theory of humour, the pleasure offered by humour is deeply connected with the pleasure of enjoying our freedom. It might be neither counterintuitive nor surprising to argue that the special freedom enjoyed by the oral
self-translator might offer conditions which are particularly felicitous for the production of
humour: humour travels well when it travels freely.
APPENDIX A: Interviews

NOTE: An Index of the themes covered by these interviews can be found in Section A.11, where each theme is listed, along with a reference to the interview in which it occurs. The line numbers displayed next to the questions and answers are used to identify specific passages within the interviews.
Giada Garofalo is, with me, the most experienced among the Italian stand-up comedians who perform regularly on the UK circuit. The origin, motivations and development of her comedy are illustrated in the course of this interview, collected in London on February 28 2015.

GP – First off all, when did you move to the UK?

GG – It was in 2002, I think in July.

GP – And back then you had never done any comedy in Italy, correct?

GG – Yes, that’s correct.

GP – So, how and why did you start doing stand-up comedy?

GG – I started almost as a game. I had always thought: “in another life, I would like to be a comedian”. But I had only been exposed to Italian comedy and, because comedy in Italy was mainly based on sketches and characters, I thought I didn’t have the required acting skills for that. Only once, around twelve years ago, after I had moved to London, I saw my first stand-up comedy gig, at the Backyard comedy club in Bethnal Green. I wasn’t swept off my feet straight away, but it stayed in my mind. Until seven years ago my ambitions were merely academic, I had two Master’s and I wanted to do a Ph.D., but I couldn’t get a scholarship and I couldn’t afford to do it without one, so I was feeling a bit down and confused about what to do. One day, my sister, told me: “Why do you have to wait for your next life to do comedy? Why don’t you give it a try?” And I thought: “You are right, actually”. When my 30th birthday came about I decided to do something special for it, so I joined a stand-up comedy course with the idea of doing just one performance, at my birthday, in front of my friends. I did my first gig few days before, just to be sure... and I haven’t stopped since.

GP – So it was the discovery of stand-up that made you realise that you didn’t have to wait for your “next life”? What was, exactly, that attracted you to it, as opposed to the type of comedy you knew from Italy? The greater spontaneity, maybe?

GG – Yes, the appearance of spontaneity, although now I know that it’s the result of much preparation. Given that my original idea was just to try doing comedy and to do it for one time...
only, it seemed to me that preparing five minutes of stand-up required less investment than, say, developing a character. But it was only in the past two years that I really got passionate about it, at first it was mainly about the thrill of going on stage, it was like a sport, it was more about “killing” or “dying” and the ups and downs associated with these outcomes. I am not saying that I don’t care about the outcome now, but I’m more focused on developing the technique, I’m more focused on the writing and on developing my performance skills. Since I moved my focus to these aspects, I’ve started loving comedy more and more.

GP – This brings us to the next question: how do you write your material?

GG – It depends. When I started, I used to write everything word-by-word, including “Hello, my name is…” It was only after years that I started to go unscripted. When I started, in fact, I was very nervous on stage, probably due to the fact that I was performing in English, my second language. After a while, then, I felt the need to set myself free, as a performer, and the best way to do so was setting myself free from the script. Unfortunately, the fact that I have a very good memory represented an obstacle: once I had written something, it was automatic for me to remember it word-by-word, so it was very difficult not to deliver it the same way. For my first Edinburgh solo show, in 2013, I still had a word-by-word script, while for the one I’m working on at the moment I only have bullet points. This way I hope to be freer to respond to whatever happens in the room, to ad-lib and so on.

GP – And how about the passage to doing comedy in Italian? How and when did it happen?

GG – It happened by chance, actually it happened thanks to you, who introduced me to the London Puma. Before that, I didn’t have any opportunity to perform in Italian here in England and in Italy, until a few years ago, there wasn’t much of a stand-up scene. But the idea of performing in Italian intrigued me... and scared me too! On one hand, in fact, in English I feel limited: my pronunciation is what it is, I can’t do dialects... sometimes it even happens that I use some “difficult” terms in the writing but, then, I’m forced to change them after the first performance, because I discover that I can’t pronounce them, that the audience just stare at me thinking: “What the hell has she just said?” So, at the end, “you dumb yourself down” 77. On the other hand, I feel much freer when I perform in English, since I can’t properly hear myself speaking. In English, I can say things that I would not feel free to say in Italian. I’m convinced

77 In English in the original.
that words, in fact, apart from their meaning, have values associated to them, which derive from the culture and the society in which they are used. You learn this by growing up in a place, so you are not really aware of these values in a second language and this makes you feel much freer. If I use a swear word in English, for instance, I don’t really feel the strength of that word. I might be intellectually aware of it, but I don’t feel it. If I do the same in Italian, there is a reaction inside me that is now “ingrained in me”, it’s almost automatic, as if it was almost genetic, but which, of course, depends on the fact that we grew up with the idea that that word is “naughty”. Besides, in English “I can get away with it”, I mean, on one hand as a foreigner there is the risk of becoming a character, of being labelled, which is why I try never to base my promotion on me being Italian; on the other hand, if we make a mistake, we are forgiven and we can actually play with that forgiveness. We are also free to play with our choice of expressions, for instance I like to use American expressions, which is a choice I probably wouldn’t have if I were English speaker, but as an Italian people seem to think: “It doesn’t really matter if you use English or American expressions, given that you can’t pronounce properly either of them”.

GP – So you feel freer in English than in Italian?

GG – Let’s say that the two languages to me offer two different types of freedom. In Italian I feel freer with regards to my ability to use the language, I have more rhythm, for instance. In English I feel freer from my internal censor, so to speak.

GP – And do you ever translate from one language into the other?

GG – First of all, if I write something that is related to my experience in London, it comes natural to me to write it in English. If, instead, my train of thoughts originates from an experience I had in Italy, then automatically I start writing in Italian. Often, however, I start writing in a language, then I have to use a word or a sentence in English and, after that, I automatically do the... how do you say “switch” in Italian? My notes, in fact, are often written in both languages. Then, of course, it will happen that I deliver that material in a language

78 In English in the original.
79 In English in the original.
80 An example will be reproduced and discussed in appendix to this interview.
first and then in the other. What I do, in that case, is not that I translate it, but that I rethink it.  

GP – Well, you don’t rethink it from scratch, right?  

GG – No, of course I start from something, what I don’t do is start again from the script, I don’t translate the original script. Sometimes I improvise the translation directly on the stage.  

Particularly now, given that I am trying to be more off-script in my performance style. In fact, I can use the need to move from one language to the other as a chance to do just that, to move from a situation in which I have a written script to one in which I don’t. The exception is when the punch line of a joke happens to be culture-specific or language-specific, in which case I need to spend more time on finding an equivalent in the other language, in advance of the first performance in it. Moreover, I’m now working on the tempo of my performance, which is something the importance of which only became clear to me quite recently. So, sometimes, as an exercise, I write something that is almost in rhyme. Keeping the same rhyme and rhythm in translation would be very difficult, which is probably the reason why, at the moment, I am limiting this exercise to my material in English. Going back to the punch lines, some are indeed untranslatable. For instance, I have a joke in which the punch line is “You should have gone to Specsavers”. Not only does it include a cultural reference, which might not constitute a problem if I deliver it in front of Italian audience members who live in the UK, but the line is a quote from an advertisement campaign, which would be lost as such by its translation into a different language. But I don’t see that as a problem, more as an opportunity to write a

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81 This “non translation” can actually been seen as falling within the concept of “translation” as it is proposed in this study, although with two important qualifications, which probably explain why Giada seems to exclude what she does from her own, apparently more restrictive, implicit notion: a) it represents a form of self-translation, hence allowing for a greater degree of “freedom” than is normally allowed for allographic translation; b) it is not a translation of the written script or notes, but of the “mental text” developed in preparation of, and at the same time as a result of, the performance in the other language (this will be made more explicit in the course of the interview and in the appendixes, in which specific examples will be investigated). The term “re-thinking” (“ripenso”, in the original) used by Giada seems to capture well those two aspects, with the “ri-” part of it capturing the first aspect and the “thinking” part capturing the second one.

82 This represents the reversal of the phenomenon that was observed in performers with a much weaker competency in their second language, such as Luca Cupani, for whom translating into a second language seems to require becoming more “scripted”. Interestingly, Giada does not specify the direction of the translation: she is now at such a level of proficiency with regard to her second language that she can now use oral self-translation as a chance to “leave the script behind”, regardless of whether the translation is from her native language to her second language or the other way round.

83 The text of this routine is reproduced in the Appendix A.1.2.

84 The other option would be to keep it as “embedded English”. My recent experience with some new material delivered at the London Puma, however, seemed to indicate to me that language switch seems to be detrimental
different punch line. Sometimes the new punch line happens to be better than the one in the original and, if it happens to be non language-specific, I “retrofit” it to my sets in the original language too.

GP – What do you think are the most likely reasons for these translation challenges? We have already mentioned cultural references... what about wordplay?

GG – I don’t rely much on wordplay in either language. I guess it depends on what interests you in the process of doing comedy. For me wordplay is too technical, I am much more interested in developing the raw ideas, so to speak. That is why the moment I enjoy the most, when developing new material, is when I perform it for the first time. It is only of late that I have started to dedicate more attention to the editing. Maybe it’s a form of laziness, given that I don’t like doing editing.

GP – I remember you doing a routine about the difference in the attitude towards little boys and little girls who “play with themselves” and I remember you using the expression “whore!” to describe the adults’ moralising attitude towards the latter. You fretted for a long time about of whether it was the right word to use or it was too strong, right?

GG – Yes, it’s connected to what I was saying about the difficulty to evaluate the strength of words in your second language. I like the sound of that word, I can play a lot with the delivery of it, but it was associated with a very taboo subject, which is sexuality in connection with children, so I decided to go for a “safer” word in order to compensate for that.

GP – When I first heard that routine, knowing your origins, I thought you had written it with the Sicilian dialect expression in mind, “bottana”, which is the one you used when you did that routine in Italian. Was that the case?

GG – No, that expression came to my mind later, when I did that routine in Italian and I discovered that it came natural to me to use the Sicilian expression. Again, I think it is because in Italian I can feel the social value of the word, so I felt the need to soften the blow of the expression by using the dialect, which makes it more comic85.

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85 Dialects in Italy are perceived as a mark of the speaker’s “low status” and are often perceived as almost intrinsically comical, which explains why Italian comedians employ them very frequently. Besides, Giada was
GP – I find your exploration of the theme of child sexuality very interesting. My impression is that, after Freud did a lot of work to uncover it, the understandable concerns about paedophilia have pushed us to re-repress the very idea of it, so to speak.

GG – Yes, that is exactly why I feel the need to talk about it.

GP – Which brings us to the next question: what is your attitude towards “political correctness” and self-censorship?

GP – My position is that, if the only reason for saying something “shocking” would be trying to shock people, then I censor myself. Maybe it’s because I don’t see myself as a particularly “edgy” person. If, instead, I think that something needs to be said, because it represents how I think things are, then I use comedy to say it, regardless of its shock value. For instance, I recognise that the repression of the very idea of child sexuality might play a useful social role in the fight against paedophilia, that it represents a useful lie, but I think it is a lie nevertheless. It would be like trying to fight racism by convincing people that there are no such things as different skin colours. Comedy offers a great opportunity to uncover that sort of lie, in a situation when it can be done safely.

GP – Don’t you think that there is a liberatory pleasure in the violation itself of a taboo?

GG – Personally I am not interested in that pleasure per se. My main motivation in saying something “controversial” is not that there is a taboo to break, but that the taboo is preventing us from saying something that I think is worth saying. For me comedy is mainly a means of expression, it is a chance to say whatever in that moment I feel the need to say. It might be something that makes me angry about society or it might be a personal problem I need to deal with. In fact, I tend to use laughter a lot in my day-to-day life, to deal with my problems.

GP – Does comedy help you, in this sense?

GG – For sure, I have never felt so balanced since I started doing comedy. I feel the need to express myself and comedy is the freest language I can find. This freedom makes me feel much better.

referring to an episode that occurred in London among English friends (hence, according to what she said before, the routine was probably originally written in English), and the expression was attributed, in direct speech, to one of these friends, so the usage of a Sicilian dialect expression clearly carried a strong element of incongruity.
GP – This reminds me of the fact that your comedy is very personal nowadays, while when I first met you used to be much more political. Do you agree?

GG – When you start you don’t have a clear idea of what you want to do. In my case, I mainly knew what I didn’t want to do. I didn’t want to play the “foreign comedian” and talk about being Italian, because it’s what all foreign comedians do... sorry, I know that you did that too, but I wasn’t interested. I didn’t want to talk about being a woman, because I didn’t want to be labelled as the female comedian who always talks about “women things”. What I was interested in was politics. I’m still interested in it, but I ended up playing the left wing political circuit and, once, I asked the audience to sing a song with me, and they did, which that made me feel like a mere entertainer, not a satirist.

GP – Do you mean that you realise you were, as they say, preaching to the converted?

GG – Even worse, that they were even more “converted” than me! At that point I realised that the only way to do real political satire was trying to explore ideas that are different from yours. With time, then, my interest moved from political satire to social satire. The problem with politics is that it is always perceived as something external: even if you are satirising a party in front of its own electors, or your own political views, the target of your humour is still felt as something abstract and impersonal. But politics, after all, is a result of society and society is us. That is why nowadays I am more interested in doing social satire, since I am much more interested in mocking ourselves for what we are. And, of course, the process of recognising all this went in parallel with my comedy becoming more and more personal. There was a moment, two years after I started, that I realised I was trying to decide what type of comedian I was, from the outside, so to speak, instead of trying to discover what kind of comedian I was. So I took six months off performing and I dedicated that time to writing and to exploring new ideas. In doing so a great help was the discovery of the London Puma. It’s a real gift, since it offers the chance to explore new ideas every two weeks in a very relaxed environment, outside the conditionings of the normal comedy circuit. It was there that I discovered who I was, by speaking and listening to myself, instead of trying to define myself. I think, moreover, that what contributes to making the London Puma such a good environment to generate new ideas is the chemistry between us regular performers, including the fact that sometimes we heckle each
other, pushing each other to respond. It is like the role of the “spalla”\textsuperscript{86} in the traditional Italian comedy scene, but done in a much more natural way.

GP – Speaking of the Italian comedy scene, have you ever performed in Italy?

GG – No, I haven’t, but I would like to.

GP – What are your expectations and concerns?

GG – I have no idea of what to expect, since I have never attended live comedy in Italy. In terms of concerns, I don’t consider myself particularly “edgy”, but it is true that I tend to prefer strong and sometimes dark subjects. I don’t know what response these subjects would produce and I am a bit worried about that. I don’t think that the Italian audiences are more closed-minded than the British ones, but I think they have fewer chances to be exposed to this type of comedy, but maybe it’s just a prejudice on my part. This reminds me: they say that the audience needs to trust you, but I have come to the conclusion that the only way to gain this trust is for you to trust them. Trusting the audience is very important, because the moment you say something, you are relinquishing control on how it will be interpreted.

GP – Interesting: this seems to explain why the “foreign”, i.e. non-Italian, comedians who come to the London Puma with the expectation of not being understood by the Italian-born audience tend to perform badly.

GG – Yes, we all have prejudices we need to work on, but is also up to us not to label and pigeon-hole ourselves. If we manage to do so then, maybe, other people will overcome their prejudice about us. We need to trust their ability to do so.

GP – Which reminds me of the expectations of the non-Italian members of the audience, who tend to be people who love Italy and who sometimes seem a bit disappointed by our attitude towards it.

GG – Maybe they are indeed able to appreciate our critical attitude. Again, we need to trust their ability to do that too.

\textsuperscript{86} Literally “shoulder”, i.e. a second performer whose main role is to set the situation for the main performer to deliver the punch line. The closest correspondent in the modern English language comedy scene is the straight man of a double act. The difference, however, is that in Italy the role of the spalla is usually played by the MC or compere, i.e. the presenter of the specific night, meaning that the same comedian can interact with a different spalla on different nights.
A.1.1 Discussion of example from Giada Garofalo’s notes

Figure 3: Example of notes from Garofalo.

GP – Can you tell me something about the origin of this page of notes, please?

GG – I don’t know, that’s the problem. I don’t write “jokes” as such. My way of writing is that an idea just comes to my mind... which often happens at the moment of going to bed... I like it that way, sometimes people ask me: “What are you going to do tonight?” and I’m tempted to reply: “I’m going to think”... and then I write the idea down in a note. This one, for instance, came from the idea that “To be or not to be” sounded very “psychoanalytical” to me, so I followed that idea and explored what consequences I could draw from it. As a result, I rewrote the “To be or not to be” monologue in such a way to express the dilemma I saw posed by psychoanalysis, although, of course, in comedic terms: the dilemma between “being an asshole” on one hand and “exploding” because of frustration on the other. And I have no idea of why the latter option took the aspect of “slaughtering a prostitute on the way to bowling”. Sometimes you just need an image, the stranger the better.
GP – It’s interesting that you started in Italian and then switched to English. Was it the sentence “to be or not to be” that triggered the switch?

GG – Yes. What happened is that, when I started thinking about it, I was thinking in Italian, then the quote came to me in original English and so I started thinking and writing in English.

GP – And did you perform it first in Italian or in English?

GG – In performance I only used the first line, the one written in Italian, and I did it at the London Puma, hence in Italian. Then I moved to talking about something else.87

GP – So your notes tend to be bilingual and then, in performance, you choose one language or the other according to what is required by the situation?

GG – Yes, that is correct88. How detailed my notes are depends also on the kind of routine. If it is surreal, like this one, I need to write down more, in order not to forget it. If, instead, is an episode from my life, I just write down one or two key words and then I trust my memory of that episode.

GP – Going back to this page of notes, what does that “Scotch Lagavulin” mean, at the top?

GG – Nothing, it just happened that I tested a whiskey I liked and I took a note of the name.

87 The fact that the first line on this page of notes was the only one written in Italian (and, hence, did not required translation) might have played a role, maybe unconsciously, in Giada’s selection of it as the only one included in her performance in Italian, as if she was following “the path of least resistance”.

88 See discussion in Appendix A.1.1.
A.1.2 Discussion of extract from Giada Garofalo’s electronic script for the show “Flipper committed suicide”

“I read this article a while back, I was doing some research, about a gas company in Estonia. They got into major troubles for their new advertising campaign, huge backlash over the internet. Basically what they did, they wanted to be funny, is that they used a picture of the gates of Auschwitz, with the caption: gas heating – flexible, convenient and effective! Can you believe it? Where the hell did you take your marketing degree, at Disneyland? Didn’t you think that a joke like this would maybe fire back? This is like... I was thinking of some fun advertising we have in this country... and this is like using a picture of the twin towers on fire, with the caption: ah, should have gone to Specsavers!”

GP – This extract comes from the script of your Edinburgh show “Flipper committed suicide”. Can you explain how the script for this show originated?

GG – It came from the necessity to impose a coherent narrative structure to the “random” ideas I have developed during the past year, and which I wrote down in notes like the one we just discussed. So, I copied those routines down electronically, I edited them and I added the links.

GP – It is written as if to be performed word-by-word. Did you follow it word-by-word in the performance too?

GG – Not at all, for instance there are entire chunks of it that I actually never performed. Other parts were changed, without me updating the written script accordingly.89

GP – What if you were asked to translate the show into Italian? Would you also write it word-by-word in the Italian version?

GG – No, maybe two years ago, but not now.90

GP – What would the starting point be, then? The show how you developed it in the meantime?

GG – Yes, of course, there would be no point in “going backwards”. That, however, is the main reason why I decided to “kill” it as a show. You reach a point when, as a comedian, you

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89 As suggested in the previous note.
90 Giada here, probably, means both that she doesn’t need to go back to her script, since after performing it for two years it’s “in her mind”; and that doing so would be pointless, since the script is now out of date.
outgrow a show, you feel the need to try something else. My first show was like a summary of
all the themes I’m interested in. Now I feel ready to “zoom in” and to develop the single
themes.

GP – Looking at this specific routine, you said that the punch line was completely different in
the Italian version. Do you remember what it was?

GG – Yes, I was imagining that they were advertising an auto-pilot system with the slogan “Non
sbagli mai rottta”, “You never get the route wrong”. But in translation the rhythm got lost. What
I liked of the Italian version was the sound of the term “rotta”, with its “r” and “t” clear-cut
sounds and its “ta-ta” kind of rhythm. Fortunately, in English I found the Specsavers reference,
which works even better, but cannot be re-translated in Italian. By the way, I think that the
English language generally has more of those clear-cut endings that make it more “punchy”,
more apt to deliver a punch line. I think this is one of the reasons why stand-up comedy
developed in the English-speaking world. The Italian language is, sometimes, too mellow for
these purposes, so you need to use more words, you need to compensate by offering a richer
setup. The English language, moreover, is much more fluid, for instance every word can
become a verb, even a simple sound. For instance, from “shhh!” you can derive the verb “to
shush” somebody. Now, compare “don’t shush me!” with “non mi dire di stare zitto!”. Which is
more “punchy”? Besides, English does not have genders.

GP – In what sense do you think the absence of genders helps?

GG – Well, it allows for more ambiguity and ambiguity can be used for comic purposes. For
instance, I have a routine in which I talk about the difficulty of admitting to yourself that a
relationship is not working. It goes: “you know when you’re horny… and you are in bed, and
you wait… for your partner… to fall asleep, so that you can masturbate in peace? That’s a
relationship that is not working!” Well, in Italian “partner” would become either “compagno”
or “compagna”, you would be forced to specify the gender, and this would make the self-
recognition more difficult for part of the audience. Not to mention cases in which the audience
is intentionally misdirected to think that you are talking about a man, while at the end you
reveal that you are talking about a woman, or the other way round. In Italian the ambiguity
would be lost from the very moment when you introduce the article!
A.1.3 Supplementary interview with Giada Garofalo on the Italian translation of her show “Live in the staff room (sex, fairy tales and serial killers & other stuff)”

In June 2016, Giada Garofalo moved back to Italy. On 22 September 2016, she performed for the first time a full Italian translation of the Edinburgh Fringe 2015 show Live in the staff room (sex, fairy tales and serial killers & other stuff), with the title Sesso, favole e serial killer. We then arranged a supplementary interview (collected via Skype on 28 September 2016) to discuss this experience.

GP – Can you can give me a bit of background to your decision to go back to Italy?

GG – I don’t consider it as going back, more as a change of my “base”: my plans for the next two years span across both Italy and the UK. I’m preparing a new show, something very ambitious, which I would like to bring both to Edinburgh and to Australia. It was mainly in order to cut my accommodation costs. I was also hoping I would keep working [as a Business Analyst] from Italy [with my UK clients], but Brexit put everything on hold. I have started working as a translator, though, I have started translating books. Beside the economic considerations, there was also the curiosity for the Italian stand-up comedy scene, which is in its infancy…. better, it’s at an embryonic state… even better, it’s at in a spermatozoic state. The positive side is that it’s still a Wild West, it’s very free, unlike the UK scene, which has become quite homogenous.

Also, as you know I’m very lazy, I really don’t like editing my material, so I wanted to put myself in a condition in which I was forced to do it. When you move from a language to another, you are forced to do some editing.

GP – Very interesting.

GG – Yes, you are really forced to work on your material. I realised, above all, that transferring material from English to Italian is more difficult than the other way round, which is what I used to do [when I developed material in Italian] at the London Puma [in order to transfer it to the English comedy circuit].

GP – Why do you think it is so?

GG – Because English is more malleable. It has a lot of words with a double meaning, it has phrasal verbs, the sense of which can be completely changed by simply replacing a short
propagation, and words are not gendered, as we have already discussed. There is a shorter path
to the punch line. Maybe, however, it is also a matter of habit. I was used to doing comedy
mostly in English, so maybe comedians who are more used to performing in Italian find it
easier. The thing I struggle the most, in Italian, is finding the right rhythm: it all sounds very
verbose to me. Particularly when doing a full one-hour show, as opposed to a ten minute set.
At the end, though, the show went well, at least according to the feedback I received... you
know I’m always very critical with myself. It was a show that I had done so many times in
English, so it was very difficult to be in the moment... half of my head was somewhere else...
like if I was at the United Nations... you know, as if I was doing simultaneous interpreting.
Material kept coming to my mind in English. A one-hour show is completely different from a
ten minutes set, it needs to have a structure, for which for instance call backs are very
important. So, although I wasn’t expecting it, I realised how much got lost in translation. I
realised how much material depended on the way it was expressed in English.

GP – Even if, as you said before, you don’t do much wordplay?

GG – Yes, for wordplay I mean, for instance, puns, such as that bilingual pun I did when with
performed in Italian at Kingston [upon Thames], based on the words “fussy” and the Italian
word “fesso”. But I realised that, wordplay apart, the way things are expressed plays also a big
role in my material. For instance, in the show there is a passage about viral videos on Facebook,
which are often advertised as something that “will blow your mind”. So I had a routine in which
I tried to explain why those videos will blow your mind, asking myself, for instance, whether
those videos can really burn your neurons. So, it wasn’t wordplay, but the object of my humour
was the expression itself, it was based on me taking it literally. That was completely lost in the
passage to Italian, since in Italian we don’t use the literally translated expression “ti farà
scroppiare la testa” to mean that something will amaze you. So I had to do some research in
order to keep the structure of the routine while changing its surface. Well, the Italian
expression that is typically used in the same situations is “ti stupirà” [“it will amaze you”]. I then
discover that “stupore” [“amazement”] has also a psychiatric meaning, that of “stupor”, of a
complete mental lockdown, so I decided to play on that. The problem was that, this way, in
Italian it became much more contrived than in its English original. I’ve also realised that my
material contained more culture-specific references than I thought. If you live in a place, you
end up making references to a culture without realising it, because the culture is around you, it
is when you move somewhere else that you realise that they are indeed specific. So, the positive thing is that it forced me to work on the editing.

GP – What did you start from, for your translation?

GG – This was another problem I had underestimated. What happened is that when I developed my second Edinburgh Fringe show I decided not to write it down, for my personal reasons of development as a performer. So, I don’t have a written script for this show, it developed on the stage and sometimes recorded. As a result, resuming it after one year [from my last performance of it in English] was challenging. During the Edinburgh Fringe 2015, before my recorder’s batteries died and I didn’t even have time to change them (you know how crazy it is there) I recorded my show every day. So I had the recordings of my first ten performances of the run, or something like that. Problem was that there were the first performances, after which the show had much developed, so I didn’t have any recording of all the additions and changes I made during the later performances. I think I managed to reconstruct most of them, though, because listening to the early recordings made me remember the changes I made afterwards.

GP – Interesting. Do you think that this might be connected to your need to perform that sort of simultaneous translation on the stage you were mentioning before? I mean, do you think it was mostly those elements you did not have a recording of that required the translation on the stage?

GG – I think that was more related to the fact that I had to listen to the recordings in English and try to recall the missing parts in English, so the show kept coming back to my mind in English. I didn’t write the show in Italian either, I just wrote down some bullet points and some bits. I actually wrote down in Italian only the bits that had required an *escamotage* to be adapted from the English show. So, I started from the recordings in English and I tried to “re-say” those things in Italian, more than doing a word-to-word translation. It’s at that stage that I started to realise how much was getting lost. For instance, there is this part of the show about how the different swear words you find in different cultures reflect, in my opinion, the values of that culture. For instance, there was a bit about the difference between the British expression “wanking” and the American expression “jerking off”. That bit was very much written with an Anglo-Saxon audience in mind, aware not only of the different expressions, but...
of the different stereotypes related to the perception of the Americans among the British. I did
not know whether it would work in front of an Italian audience, so I tried it out and it worked.
There is another part, however, based on the fact that the vulgar expression for the female
genitals, the famed “C-word”, is an insult in English, but a compliment in Italian. That worked
less well, because telling an English-speaking audience that the most taboo word in their
language is actually used as a compliment provokes some sort of shock in the audience, while
telling an Italian audience that a compliment in their language becomes an insult in English is
just perceived as slightly strange. You are not dealing with a taboo of your target audience any
longer, only with its absence, so you lose the shock factor. The next time I’ll do the show in
Italian I will probably cut that part out or at least I’ll shorten it.

GP – On the subject of taboo, in your previous interview you expressed the concern that your
focus on dark topics might represent a problem when transferring your show to Italy. How was
your experience with regard that aspect, at the end?

GG – As you probably remember, the show focuses on three topics. The first is sex, and that
part is not that dark, I talk about pornography but in a very natural way, so to speak. The
second part is about serial killers, which of course is very dark, since I go into the detail of their
modus operandi. The third is about fairy tales: I show how gruesome the original versions of
some well-known fairy tales actually are. Both in Britain and in Italy, it is the part about sex that
caused the strongest tension in the audience. So, no difference there. I don’t want go all
feminist on it, but I think there is still a big difference in the way men and women are perceived
when they talk about certain subjects. I even perceive it myself: a vulgar woman is “felt” as
more vulgar than a vulgar man. The second factor, I think, is that the part about sex was “real”,
was more associated with our day-to-day life, while the parts about serial killers and fairy tales
were less relatable. Again, there is no difference in that between Britain and Italy. Regarding
the other two parts, I actually perceived less tension in Italy than in Britain. It is also true,
however, that I did the show in Italy only once, so I don’t know what is just specific to the
audience of that night or can be generalised.

GP – Generally speaking the show worked, then?

GG – As I said, the feedback received was very good, but I was much more critical of my own
performance. I don’t want to consider it in terms of success or failure, though, more as the
dress rehearsal of something I am developing. A difference here in Italy is that audiences tend
to applaud more frequently. In Britain the applause break is the exception, not the rule. In Italy,
instead, audience behave much more like at the theatre, in which the applause is the main
expression of appreciations. From a performance point of view, I was taken aback, I didn’t
know how to deal with that type of applause.

GP – What about the logistics of the show? Was it paid for or free?

GG – Here people often use Arci\textsuperscript{91} clubs for their shows, which require a membership fee. On
the top of it, some people also ask for a voluntary contribution or, in other cases, a ticket. I did
not ask for it this time, because it was a try out show. I also brought quite a few friends,
something like 10 out of an audience of 50 (which meant that the small room was full, though),
so I did not want to weight on them too much. You know how it is in Italy, most people of a
certain age are married with children, so they probably also had to pay for a baby-sitter. Maybe
it was also the influence of the mind-set I develop in Britain, where more and more shows are
free with donations at the end.

GP – Where was it?

GG – It was in Bergamo, where there is a pioneering venue, called MAITE, which has been
doing comedy shows since 2010-2011, at first with a few shows each year, now with two or
three shows per month. They are well organised, most of the other comedians do ask for a
contribution, although I don’t know the details. Most of those comedians have also appeared
on TV, though, which makes a difference.

GP – I noticed that your show was covered in the local pages of a national newspaper, right?

GG – Yes, in the Bergamo edition of Corriere della Sera. That was much the result of the
promotion from the people who run the comedy night, who sent a press release with my story,
which apparently caught the attention of the Corriere local editors.

GP – Do you think that being a returning emigrant helped you in that? Did you use that in your
show?

\textsuperscript{91} Originally A.R.C.I., acronym for Associazione Ricreativa Comunista Italiana (Italian Communist Recreational
Association). According to their website, they have 5,000 clubs all over Italy, which, as Garofalo says, often play
the role of the first port of call for performers and promoters looking for a venue, similar in this to the role played
in Britain by the function rooms of pubs.
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GG – No, because it had nothing to do with the themes of the show. Despite that, yes, it might have helped the promotion, because stand-up comedy is perceived as something that is original to the English-speaking world, so if you come from Britain you are perceived as importing stand-up comedy to Italy. I must admit, though, that I am still spending a lot of time outside Italy, so I still haven’t formed a clear impression on the Italian comedy scene. Saying that, it seems that the comedy nights are much fewer and far between than in Britain, but the scene is developing. In a few days, I’ll do a half hour set as part of a double bill and they will pay me €60, on top of which I will keep part of the donations. This does not happen that often on the British scene, in which is more and more difficult to be paid at all, if you are not an opener or a headliner. Probably the difference is that in Britain you typically play ten minute sets or so, while the scene in Italy seems to be focusing on solo shows. Which suits me perfectly, given that I see myself more as a solo show comedian than as a club comedian.

GP – There also seems to be a very interesting power vacuum in Italy, given that Zelig\(^{92}\) has topped running, at least as a TV programme, right?

GG – Yes, it is not running as a TV programme any longer, but they are still running their laboratori\(^{93}\). I heard that there is a lot of resistance from them against stand-up comedy: they launched an “open mic” night, but they didn’t want to call it a “stand-up comedy” night. There seems to be a battle going on in Italy between different factions, which have different ideas of what comedy should be, and I think that the expression “stand-up comedy” is used as a weapon in this battle. It is normal for a phase in which the ground shifts, it happened the same in the 80s in the UK with the emergence of Alternative Comedy. Another big player is Comedy Central, on the Sky platform, which broadcasts two stand-up nights, one from Milan and one from Rome. The Rome group, of which Francesco De Carlo is a member, is the one that is going the strongest, with appearances on other TV channels too.

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\(^{92}\) Zelig is the name of both the most important comedy venue in Italy, located in Milan, and of the TV programme, which run on the network Canale 5 (part of the Mediaset group, owned by Silvio Berlusconi), that originated from it and that, initially, consisted in the recording of the live performances that took place in that venue (nowadays they are usually recorded in bigger venues). The success of the programme resulted in the style of comedy proposed by it, briefly described in the course of the interview, becoming the “mainstream” type of comedy in Italy. More recently, some comedians are proposing as an alternative their own interpretation of stand-up comedy, as it is discussed in the section 5.9.

\(^{93}\) Literally “laboratories”, the equivalent of what in English is usually called “new material nights”, i.e. regular comedy nights dedicated to trying out new material. As Romina explains further on, sometimes they also play the function of training workshops to nurture new comedians.
A.2 Romina Puma

I met Romina Puma in 2012 when a mutual friend told me that there was somebody in London who was setting up a regular comedy night in Italian. When I went to assist at a night, though, I was not impressed: the only comedians were Romina Puma herself and Alex Martini, who back then were still very “green”, while the rest the show was a hotchpotch of moralising storytellers, “end of the pier” puppet masters, over-sentimental singer-songwriters and once, on a different night, even a religious preacher. Despite my reservations, I joined the project and introduced Romina to the only other Italian comedian on the London circuit back then: Giada Garofalo. This doubling of the comedic forces was then followed by another development: the idea of alternating us Italian comedians performing in Italian with comedians performing in English. This allowed the London Puma to focus on comedy only and to become a relatively successful, well known and, of late, critically acclaimed regular biweekly comedy night, until Puma decided to discontinue it, at the end of 2016. The present interview with founder Romina Puma (conducted in London on 4 January 2015, hence when the London Puma was still running) covers the origin of this almost unique bilingual comedy night, as well as questions of difference between the Italian and the English comedy scenes and questions of language and translation.

GP – You started in Italy with the laboratori of Zelig. Can you tell me how they work and in what they differ from the comedy scene in the UK?

RP – Yes, that’s true, although they were not the only laboratori I was playing. There is an entire hierarchy of them, so usually you go to the other laboratori to try your material when it’s brand new and then you go to the Laboratori Zelig when it’s a bit more rehearsed. How it works is that you go to the venue in the afternoon, around 5pm, and you meet the autore, the specific comedy writer associated to that specific laboratorio, in that specific city, since they have those labs all over Italy...

94 The reference is to Kate Copstick’s interview in Fleming (2014).
95 In these three years, the London Puma night took place in four different venues. The expression “comedy night” will then be used to indicate a regular “night” of performances managed by the same people and promoted under the same banner. With few exceptions, however, such as the Comedy Store in London or Komedia in Brighton, the expression “comedy club” is also generally used to indicate a regular “night”, not necessarily identifiable with a specific venue.
96 Predictably, other instances of bilingual comedy nights can be found in Quebec.
GP – Who is this autore? A comedian herself?

RP – No, most of the time they are professional comedy writers who only work behind the scenes, writing for comedians but without performing. So, what happens is that this autore watches you performing your piece in the afternoon and, if they like it as it is, you are allowed to perform it in the evening, otherwise they come back to you with the changes they want you to make. In some cases, I sent my script to the autore by email and they sent it back to me with some jokes added and, above all, with adjustments to make it more Zelig-like. At that point you go back to perform the piece in the afternoon and, if they like the updated version, you proceed to perform it in the evening in front of the audience.

GP – So these changes are mandatory, then? I mean, if you don’t accept them, you are now allowed to perform the piece, right?

RP – Correct, without those changes your set is considered not strong enough or not satisfying the canons of Zelig. Although I must stress that I was a beginner, I guess that more established comedians are trusted more to write their own material, or to be supported by writers of their own choice, without any supervision. Mine was, above all, a training process.

GP – All this, however, makes improvisation virtually impossible, correct? I mean, here in the UK there are comedians such as Ross Noble whose sets are almost completely improvised. That would be impossible in the context you are describing, right?

RP – Yes, improvisation is reserved to reacting to unexpected events during the performance. Apart from those cases, your set is supposed to be completely scripted.

GP – And what about interacting with the audience?

RP – That wasn’t expected either, maybe there was some of it in the other laboratori, the minor ones, but not in the Zelig ones. Besides, my background was in theatre so for me there was always a fourth wall between myself and the audience.

GP – And the desired outcome of going through these laboratori is to reach the TV shows, right?

RP – Yes, first you get selected for something called Zelig Off, which is on TV but not at the prime time, and then maybe you get selected for the main Zelig programme.
GP – And what about the live scene?

RP – It’s nothing like here in the UK, in Italy people don’t seem interested in coming to see you live if they haven’t seen you on TV before.

GP – So, then in 2010 you moved to London, for reasons independent from comedy, and you had the idea of setting up your own comedy night in Italian, instead of joining the English comedy scene. What was the motivation behind that choice?

RP – It’s simple: because my English wasn’t good enough. I looked for something already established but I couldn’t find anything. I only found a group of Italians who met to discuss politics, I contacted them and I organised my first comedy performance with them, consisting in just me doing half an hour, which included all the routines I had written up to then.

GP – Did you know the English comedy scene back then?

RP – No, I knew nothing about stand-up comedy, my background was completely rooted in the Italian mainstream comedy scene.

GP – And what are, in your opinion, the main characteristics of it, apart from being more scripted? Maybe the fact that most performers play characters?

RP – Yes, plus some rituals, such as the schiaffo[^97], when the comedian enters the stage unannounced, delivers a joke and in some cases leaves straight away to do the same later on, while in other cases they stay on stage to deliver their entire set.

GP – Yes, I remember when a visiting comedian from Italy came to the London Puma when I was presenting and did exactly that, entering the stage before I could deliver the punch line of a joke, which of course I hated. It was, so to speak, an instance of clash between two different comedy cultures. So, we were talking about the dominance of characters... what was the character you played in Italy?

RP – I had many, but the character that worked the best was that of the secret lover of a famous politician. I had a spalla[^98] who, in the act, interviewed me during a talk-show kind of situation, trying to get me to name the politician, while I played dumb.

[^97]: Literally “slap”.
[^98]: See note 84.
GP – Yes, I remember you playing that character the very first time I saw you performing. In the same night, however, you also performed a piece about your experience working in an Italian restaurant in London. That one was as yourself, not as a character, right?

RP – Yes and the funny bit is that it was a piece I had written in five minutes! What happened is that, by sheer chance, I ended up watching a stand-up comedy night, in a club somewhere near the Barbican Centre in London. On the bill there was a female comedian who talked about the experience of giving birth. For me it was a revelation: it was a way of doing comedy that was completely different from what I had seen before. I found it so inspiring that I went home and I wrote my restaurant piece straight away. It’s from that moment that I stared moving towards stand-up comedy.

GP – And how about the other passage, the one to the English language? When and how was it?

RP – It was three years after moving to London and it was terrifying! In Italian I could write down some bullet points only and improvise from there, but I didn’t trust myself to do the same in English, instead I had to write down and memorise every single word99, as we used to do at school with those poems by Giacomo Leopardi! That meant that, on stage, I was terrified, since, for instance, I knew I wouldn’t be able to respond to hecklers100.

GP – And then, if I remember well, you developed, in English, some material about your disability101, which you performed in Italy and found that the audience were shocked, right?

RP – Oh, God, you can definitely say that! I must say that it was material that had also worked well in Italian in front of the London Puma audience, which is constituted mostly of Italians, but Italians who have been exposed to the English-speaking comedy culture. They know what they can expect and what they are allowed to laugh at. As you know, in fact, there are many disabled comedians on the UK circuit and they all talk a lot about their disability. In Italy, instead, there is no disabled comedian, at least to my knowledge, and the argument is very much taboo. I tried that material in two places and I got completely different reactions. When I

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99 This corresponds to what in section 2.1 has been described as oral-to-written text translation, which is often the first stage of oral self-translation.

100 While Romina was still delivering her English set orally, these fears and difficulties reveal how, at that particular stage of her development as bilingual performer, she had temporarily stepped outside the realm of proper oral performances: what she was doing was just performing a written text.

101 Romina Puma suffers from muscular dystrophy.
tried it at the Laboratori Zelig it was like, to quote one of Giada Garofalo’s jokes, experiencing a reverse tsunami [she mimics people performing a very deep intake of breath]. The funny thing was that I could see the audience, since the lights weren’t that low, and I could see that they were repressing their laughter. They were probably thinking: “I can’t laugh at that!” But I was talking about my disability in a comedy club, it was clear to me that I was giving them the authorisation to laugh! You know, one thing that happens quite often in Italy is that the audience replace laughing with applauding. When I was given feedback about the performance (in those Zelig nights, in fact, as well as the pre-performance rehearsals and suggestions, you also get post-performance feedback from the autore) I was told that it was like the applause you hear sometimes at funerals during the passage of the coffin! Not the reaction you want in a comedy night! I think it happened because it was a type of audience used to a completely different kind of comedy. Then I went to do the same set in another comedy club, managed by the group Democomica, who are among those people who are introducing stand-up comedy to the Italian audience. In fact, among them there was a performer, called Enrico Veronica, whom at first I couldn’t understand, since he was simply talking about his life and who at the Zelig nights was, quite often, not allowed to perform at all, since what he was doing was too different… well, now I understand that what he was doing was stand-up comedy. So, when I did my disability set there, it went really well, since people in that audience were more used to “alternative” material, so to speak.

GP – Now you are writing a show for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which means it’s going to be in English, but I saw you trying out parts of it in Italian. Do you tend to write more in English or Italian?

RP – It depends, some pieces are born in Italian since they are born for the London Puma, but actually other pieces are written in English, although they are first tried out in Italian. I don’t need to write down the Italian version, though, I just keep it in my mind. But I’m now at a stage of my development as a performer in English sometimes I don’t feel the need to write word-by-word the English set either. My routine about going to the gym is indicated, in the “script”, by the word “gym” only. I know where to go from there.

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102 As it has been argued 2.1.9, with the suggestion of a mental text of stand-up comedy.
103 So Puma has now reached a stage in which she can perform what in section 2.1 has been called oral-to-oral self-translation. We need to keep in mind, however, that this process of development is continuous and that
GP – Can you remember cases when the translation of material was particularly problematic?

RP – Not that many, most of my material works equally well in a language as in the other. Obviously there are some references that needed to be adapted.

GP – On that subject, I remember that, when you started in English, you had jokes about how embarrassing the name Romina is for an Italian, due to the association with the female singer from the very “cheesy” duo Al Bano & Romina. You really struggled to translate those jokes in English, right?

RP – Yes, I tried to change the reference by introducing a comparison with a female name that might be equally embarrassing, because of its association with an equally embarrassing popular culture figure, but it never worked and at the end I just removed those jokes from my set. In my restaurant set there was another joke based on the word “hospitality”, which in Italian recalls the word “ospedale”, but in English it did not work and I removed it too.

GP – How do you see the audience of the London Puma in comparison to the audience in normal English comedy nights?

RP – I think it’s an audience more aware of cultural differences, since it can make comparisons between the Italian culture and the British culture.

GP – Do you think they are more interested in comedians poking fun at Britain and its culture or at Italy and its culture?

RP – I don’t know, I guess that as long as you poke fun at something, they are happy.

GP – Don’t you think that there might be the desire of getting even, so to speak, with the host British culture? If I think about it, actually, I don’t perceive a great sense of resentment against the host culture among the Italian community in London. Maybe it’s because it’s quite a well-established community. I remember more resentment towards the “host culture” among bilingual comedians are, probably, always more “scripted” in their second language than in their native one, although decreasingly so. This conjecture will be verified in the course of the entire corpus of interviews. Romina Puma then removed those jokes from the Italian set too. Self-translation, in fact, appears to be an activity of continuous editing of the “bilingual text”, where changes are often bi-directional, as was argued in section 2.3. In the case of oral translation, there is probably also a mnemonic reason this bi-directionality of changes: if the two “texts” diverge too much, in fact, remembering both versions might become very challenging. These dynamics are discussed in more detailed in section 6.3.
my parents’ friends, who were mostly Southern Italians who had moved to Milan in Northern Italy.

RP – Yes, I remember a lot of nostalgia for Southern Italy from my mother too. But you can’t generalise. In our audience you will find all sorts of Italians in London. You will find those who hate England, since they were forced to move here for economic reasons but they don’t like it, and those who really like it here. I think that if you poke fun at England and you do it well, people of both types will laugh, but the laughter of the former maybe will be broader, it will have a different undertone to it, so to speak.

GP – Another thing I noticed is that it’s mainly the Italian comedians who have just moved to the UK who do material about cultural differences.

RP – Yes, when Luca Cupani joined us he spent the first months talking about the advertisement on the underground.

GP – I think that in a sense the London Puma has become an important element of aggregation for the Italian community in London, a bit like the Italian church in Clerkenwell.

RP – Yes, although I’ve come to the conclusion that the only way to grow is to be more and more recognised by the broader, non-Italian community. Good signs in these directions have been the interest from the blogger John Fleming and the critic Kate Copstick106.

GP – I agree; I think we are gaining a “curiosity” status. Above all among the English-speaking comedians who come to perform there, right?

RP – Yes, I find it a very interesting phenomenon. You know how I decide the bookings: usually I book comedians whom I see in the English circuit, whom I like and whom I consider comedians who can be understood by most of our audience members. But sometimes I’m forced to book people whom I haven’t seen going that strongly and the interesting thing is that those comedians always surprise me when they perform at the London Puma. There seems to be a level of warmth in our audience that allows even those comedians to shine there.

GP – Which makes, in my opinion, even more annoying when English-speaking comedians don’t go that well and blame it on the English comprehension skills of the audience. Although I must

106 Puma is referring to an interview with comedy critic Kate Copstick by comedy blogger John Fleming (2014), also discussed in section 6.3.
admit we enjoy the reversal of them becoming the “funny foreigners”, I mean, for instance, the fact they do not understand the language of the “majority” around them. But what the audience really seem to enjoy are the efforts to bridge this linguistic and cultural gap, instead of stressing it. Don’t you agree?

RP – Absolutely, of course stressing the gap is a form of defence, I hate it too when a few sentences into their set they ask: “Do you understand me?” We all live here! Once I heard an English comedian recommending the *London Puma* to another English comedian by saying that all he needed to do was to speak more *loudly* and more *slowly* than the usual. [She laughs]

GP – Maybe that was a self-deprecating joke about the attitude of the English towards other languages.

RP – Yes, maybe.

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107 English-speaking comedians always seem to “address the elephant in the room”, as an old maxim of comedy requires, by playing with their own linguistic incongruity. The most common strategy seems to be that of starting the set with a series of Italian words and the joke “this is all the Italian I know”. Others, instead, focus on the very frequent usage of *borrowed words* that is typical of bilinguals, with jokes such as: “Ah, I discovered that I understand Italian, for instance: *Oyster card, replacement bus*...”. A third strategy, although much less frequent, consists in delivering at least part of the set in Italian, typically by reading it from a piece of paper, with the chance to derive some apparently unintentional laughs (but, at another level, intentionally self-deprecating) from the mistakes and the pronunciation.
Luca Cupani is the latest Italian comedian to have become a regular performer in the UK, both in Italian at the London Puma club and in the wider, English-spoken comedy circuit. Luca did his very first comedy “gig” in February 2014, after having moved to London only three weeks earlier, at the notorious King Gong show at London’s Comedy Store, the biggest purpose-built comedy club in London, winning the night’s competition. He then did his first performance in Italian, at the London Puma, two days later. Despite having only few months of experience, he decided to perform a full one-hour show at the Edinburgh Fringe 2014. The present interview was conducted in London on 10 February 2015.

GP – If I’m not mistaken, your background is in acting and you never did comedy before you moved to the UK. Did you move here with the idea of becoming an actor?

LC – Yes, but I soon clashed against the problem of my accent. I could only play Italian characters, but on the other hand my appearance is not considered stereotypically Italian enough, so I fell through the gap, so to speak. Then some of my English friends told me I was “funny” so I thought of giving comedy a try.

GP – Did they mean you were funny in the “normal” social interaction?

LC – Yes, when I took some acting courses, including some in English and among people who were not Italian, I was always the person who made the other people laugh. That had always been the role I played among my friends, but I realised that I could do it in English too.

GP – So you didn’t have any role model in stand-up comedy?

LC – No, I only knew Woody Allen, but mainly for his films, a bit of Jerry Seinfeld from his TV series and I had seen Eddie Murphy’s show “Raw”. That was it.

GP – In fact there is a sense of “freshness” in your comedy...

LC – ...that comes from my ignorance. Yes, you can say that.

GP – And then you did your first gig, at the notorious Comedy Store’s Gong Show! How did that happen?
LC – My landlord gave me an issue of *Time Out* and I read about the Comedy Store’s open mic night. I called and got booked for five minutes, without even knowing what a gong show was. When I finally saw the room I got scared, I didn’t know it would be in front of an audience of 400 people, and I didn’t know that the audience would be so “wild”, but I think it turned out to be a good kind of fear to have.

GP – It must have been, because you won the night.

LC – Yes, by making jokes I can’t do any longer since they are considered racist.

GP – Can you give me an example?

LC – Yes, I joked about those adverts, on the tube, for pancreas cancer awareness, which tell you that one of the symptoms was that your skin becomes yellow, so my joke was: “There was a Chinese person next to me who looked very worried”. Another comedian told me that it was “very racist”, because associating the concept of “being Chinese” with the concept of “being yellow” was like using the “N-word” with regard to a black person! In the set, that joke was actually followed by me telling the hypothetical Chinese person: “Don’t worry, maybe you would become pink”. So was I racist by calling myself “pink” too? On that night the joke worked, although I must admit that the audience who go to the Comedy Store on gong show nights with the clear intention of booing the acts off stage are probably not the most “politically correct” of all audiences. After my set, the MC commented that I demonstrated that being racist is acceptable if you are a foreigner. Maybe that was a bit racist in itself, as if racism was something you could automatically expect from an Italian.

GP – You often told me how uneasy you feel about the rules of “political correctness”. Can you explain your point of view?

LC – I have two problems with it. My first problem is that it all seems to be about how we name things. I mean, now “Asian” is fine but maybe one day will also become “politically incorrect” and it will need to be replaced by “people who come from the Eastern area”, which in turn will be considered “un-PC” since “Eastern” is clearly a Eurocentric expression... All this is quite scary, because it’s a line that seems to be moving all the time.

GP – Going back to your “Chinese” joke, did you use it again?
LC – Yes, in one of those gigs in which the audience is mainly constituted by other comics, I got an “oooooohhh” as a reaction and, afterwards, three or four other comedians came to tell me that I shouldn’t do that joke any longer.

GP – So this sort of “censorship” comes more from the other comedians than from the audience, right?

LC – Yes. There is an episode that seems to prove this and that brings me to the other problem I have with political correctness in comedy, apart from the obsession with how we name things: the fact that there are some subjects that are completely taboo. One clear instance is the subject of rape. I took a brief comedy course once and I was asked to choose a “funny story” from the newspapers. I chose the story of this woman, an envious colleague of whom had put an ad on a “naughty” dating website, under the first woman’s name, saying that she liked to play the role of being raped and that she was looking for male playmates. Actually, in the end nothing serious happened to the woman, it was the guy who went there who was reported and arrested for attempting to rape her. What I found funny was the idea of somebody going to visit a complete stranger and expecting, without any hesitation or without feeling the need to check, to be allowed to behave like a rapist! I thought: you should agree a “reverse safe word”, after which rape becomes allowed, for instance: “broccoli”. But I was told that it would be a lack of respect towards women who actually went through the experience of being raped. This is what I really don’t understand about political correctness. I think that the more serious a subject is, the more we need to laugh about it, laughing is a way of coping with what we don’t like, which does not mean not showing respect for those who are going through these same bad things. As an example from my own life, at my mother’s funeral the coffin arrived in church too early, so I joked that it was the first time that my mother was early for mass. It was a self-defence mechanism; I don’t think I was offensive towards all those who lost their mother! I think comedy should entail a pact between the performer and the audience, according to which laughing is what we are there for, and that we laugh even more if we touch “serious” subjects. The other thing I don’t understand is that you are allowed only to mock groups of which you are a member yourself. If somebody who is not Italian has something funny to say about us Italians, I will be very happy to laugh at it. If, indeed, it is funny. The beauty of comedy is that punishments and rewards are immediate: you can see straight away if a joke works or doesn’t work. If you can make people laugh, that’s it, it means that the connection worked,
which of course does not mean that some audiences are not more “refined” than others. It is true that, on the other hand, the Italian culture is still not politically correct enough, that there is not enough stigma attached to causal racism, but in the British culture there is this sort of pruderie, which is probably due to a sense of guilt that derives from the colonial past. If an Indian person can make a joke about an English person, why not the other way round? It is a patronising attitude, if we were among equals everybody would be allowed to laugh at everything. But I can only adapt to these rules, at this stage of my career I need to protect myself, I can’t afford to be labelled in any negative way.

GP – So you think it’s a status problem too? I mean, Frankie Boyle can afford to make jokes that probably neither you nor I can afford to make, right?

LC – Yes, and Doug Stanhope can say whatever he wants. I think the problem of status is a more general problem, though. The best-known comedians can take their time to get the first laugh, the audience will trust them anyway and maybe even laugh at them defying their expectations, while we newcomers need to get our first laugh soon as possible, in order to gain the audience’s trust, so our comedy is inevitably more clichéd: we always start with self-deprecation or with sex, the big taboo, but we can’t risk too much.

GP – What about your technique with regard to “writing” material? You seem to have a much unstructured attitude to it, even by comedians’ standards.

LC – Yes: I don’t “write”.

GP – Not even notes?

LC – For Edinburgh I only wrote down a list of subjects with some links, but it was just two A4 sheets. What I do is: I keep repeating everything mentally. I think of what I do as an oral form, I’m like the aedos of ancient Greece. I think the reason for it is how I started. I have always been the “funny guy” who often makes the spontaneous jokes among his friends, probably because making people laugh for me was the easiest way to get social recognition. So when I started doing comedy I tried to replicate that very mechanism. I’ve always thought that a joke needs to be “served fresh”, so to speak, that if I wrote it down I would lose a lot of the energy required to deliver it effectively. As an actor, of course, I learned my scripts word-by-

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108 They are reproduced in the appendix to the interview.
109 Luca Cupani holds a degree in Classics.
word, but acting is different, since the main interaction is with the other actors, if that works it will be naturally communicated to the audience, but the interaction is not directly with the audience itself. Comedy is the opposite: it’s all about the interaction between you and the audience. Of course, when I go on stage, I know what I’m going to talk about, but not word-by-word. In Edinburgh, though, I did some proper improvisation, since I went there with 10 minutes of material and I had to do fill a 50-minute slot. But with each show of the run, the improvised part became shorter and shorter and the part based on material became longer and longer. The fact that my material is oral, though, doesn’t mean that it’s unprepared, actually I need to think about it all the time: I spent entire sleepless nights in Edinburgh wondering why the audience in the first row had left, what was wrong in what I had said, which were the parts I could keep, which were the ones that were not delivered well enough, which were the ones that had to go… I thought about those things for 24 hours a day, ok, maybe not for 24 hours, but for a very long time… but then, when I was there, I was “in the moment”. What I like the most, though, is reacting to a suggestion that comes from the audience, because it is exactly what I’ve always done among my friends.

GP – And some of those ad-lib jokes then become material too, right?

LC – Yes. The problem with that method of “writing” is that you really need an audience, which is not always easy at my stage, when sometimes the audience is just too small. I can’t wait to graduate to bigger audiences.

GP – Do you “feel” a difference between your performances in English and in Italian?

LC – Yes, my Italian is still much better than my English, so in Italian I can change registers, I might even switch to dialects, I don’t do too many dialects but I can do some of them. It’s a bit as if I was a painter and I had many nuances of colour on one side, but only five primary colours on the other. In English I’m Mondrian, in Italian I’m Turner, so to speak. On the other hand, when I perform in English the very way I speak, with my strong accent, can in itself be found funny. I need to understand how much that is productive and how much it is limiting, though.

GP – Do you mean how much they are laughing at you as opposed to with you?

LC – Yes, although, provided that they do laugh, that is all that really matters, but it might be a very short term strategy. If I switch roles, I don’t see myself watching a German comedian, for
instance, doing an entire show in broken Italian. But the fact that my English is not so strong,
and that I often lack the knowledge of the right word to use, forces me to find analogies to say
what I need to say and, actually, the jokes that work the best in my sets are those based on
analogies. So my limitations are probably stimulating my creativity.

GP – Do you ever translate between the two languages?

LC – Almost never from Italian into English, because, as I was saying, my Italian is much richer
than my English, so many nuances would be lost. Moreover, my Italian material is usually
developed at the London Puma so it is very Italy-centric. Sometimes I do the opposite, though: I
translate into Italian material originally developed in English. For me it’s like changing the
resolution of an image: you can decrease the resolution, but you can never increase it.

GP – You were right, you really have a talent for analogies! Changing subject, you don’t seem
particularly interested in wordplay, such as puns. Is it a choice of style or is it due to the fact
you switch between two languages?

LC – It’s a choice, which originated from the fact that during my very first gig, the one at the
Comedy Store, we started in 29, I was one of the last to perform and only four of us survived
the five minutes. So I had the chance to notice that most of the comedians before me were
eliminated because of their puns. In most cases the setup was very long and the punch line was
very disappointing, with the disappointment being sanctioned by a red card. So I thought better
of making the same mistake. More generally speaking, I find wordplay for wordplay’s sake a bit
sterile.

GP – My impression is that the bar is set very high, in the sense that delivering a bad pun is
considered a lazy form of comedy so it gets punished, but if you manage to deliver a very good
one it pays very well, apart from being great fun. By the way, previously you mentioned the
London Puma: do you feel a particular connection with the audience there?

LC – Yes, I think that at the London Puma there is a strong identification between us performers
and the audience due to the fact that we are all Italians who migrated to London. I think this is
what defines us as a “group”, in fact the first question from the MC is always about how long
people have been living in London for. On the other hand, the audience of the English-speaking
clubs are my real target, since they are the one I need to conquer to build a career in comedy.
Here I must make a distinction between the “real” audience, which I like, and the audience of the open mic nights\textsuperscript{110}, which sometimes feel more like a hostage situation, with a few audience members surrounded by many comedians. You really wonder what the point of doing them is. As I said, I like the “real” English-speaking audience, although I’m always worried about the need of being politically correct. So far I can only adapt, I hope in the future to gain both the status and the linguistic abilities to make a theme of it, to talk about the problem itself.

GP – What can you say about your first Edinburgh Fringe experience, done only after few months on the club circuit? Was it useful?

LC – Yes, it was a fantastic experience! I need to thank you for being my Virgil; indeed, it looked at times a bit like Dante’s Inferno, particularly that circle in which the gluttons are punished with a constant rain. It really helped me to get to know a very wide variety of comedians. I mean, maybe a rock musician never goes to a blues concert, but comedy is so personal that everybody has his or her own style, so you can relate to all sorts of comedy, just as you can relate to all sorts of people. It gave me a lot of stage time and it allowed me to develop my material. I was so naïve that, once, I went to see the show of Francesco De Carlo and Eddie Izzard was in the audience, but I didn’t know who he was, so I thought: why doesn’t Francesco “pick on” that weird looking guy with painted nails and high heels? Then after the show I saw the other audience members asking Izzard for an autograph and I realised he must have been someone famous.

GP – When you started your style was very “observational”, while now it’s becoming more and more “confessional”. Do you agree? And, if yes, what do you think are the reasons for this change?

LC – I agree. I think it’s due to the fact that when I did my first gig, at the Comedy Store, I had been in London only for three weeks, so it was natural for me to share my first impressions of it. Then I realised that it might represent a “lazy” form of comedy. It is a bit like what you said about puns, the bar is high, you need to find some really interesting observations, otherwise you risk doing “cheap” comedy. And to make that type of observations I need to live here

\textsuperscript{110} Comedy nights for which no previous experience is required, so comedians are not booked by a promoter, but they can just turn in or they can register themselves in advance. They are usually chosen by new comedians or by more experienced comedians who want to try new material.
longer and observe more. My ideal would be to do a show made of a third of improvised
comedy, a third of observational comedy and a third of confessional comedy.

GP – I think the term “confessional” suits you particularly well, given that you are a practising
Catholic. I have noticed that it is emerging more and more in your comedy. Is it the case?

LC – Yes, because it’s an integral part of my life. Let me help you to understand my background
a bit better: since I was a child, at home, every night my parents and I read one passage from
the Old Testament, one from the Gospels and one from the Epistles. I became acquainted very
early with the Maccabees! Catholicism for me is like those Microsoft applications that you can’t
uninstall without the computer stopping to work all together. I can have an argument with
God, but I can’t deny his existence while I’m having an argument with Him! Faith is something
that is deep inside me, so to speak. And comedy is about bringing yourself to the table, so the
more I can speak about that side of me, the better. It would also be cathartic, in a sense. For
instance, if, like everybody else, I try to have some sexual “adventures”, but it also happens
that I live them with a sense of guilt, this cannot not come out in my comedy. I need to find the
right key to talk about it, though. For instance, I can ask God difficult questions, just as Job did
in the Bible: why He took my hair away, for a start. I’m sure that God has a sense of humour.

GP – Don’t you think that there has always been a difficult relationship between religion and
humour?

LC – Yes, but the Carnival was born out of religion.

GP – That is true, but it was an exception of license set on a background of repression, which
also came out of religion and constituted its rule.

LC – But I think there is room for laughter in religion. Secular ethics, after all, is set by men for
other men, so there is nothing particularly funny in men’s failure to live by it. Religion, instead,
sets a very high ideal, in comparison to which men are often found wanting. And wherever
there is a gap between an ideal and its application in reality there is also room for humour.
Religious people are conscious about their inadequacy, so they are often self-ironic. Think of
how Dante, who was deeply religious, depicted the Popes of his time. Or think of Jewish
humour, which also has its roots in religion. I think you can laugh at your own religion, without
betraying it, by laughing at your own failures to live by it. To go back to a more personal
ground, I have a very difficult relationship with my own brother, to the point that sometimes I can’t help wishing him dead... so much for brotherly love! That’s why I went to confession, the last time I did. Non-Catholics tend to see confession only as an easy way out, but the very existence of confession represents an admission of our own inadequacy. More generally speaking, everybody has some connection with religion, either because they embraced it or because they rejected it, so talking about it might help me to connect more deeply with more people. But, again, I can’t just “decide” to do a show about religion. Given my way of “writing” my shows I can only do a show and then discover, so to speak, that religion is what it was about.
A.3.1 Luca Cupani’s notes for his show “Free Fall” at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2014

Figure 4: First example of notes from Luca Cupani (bigger image).
GP – What’s the difference between the notes in Figure 4 and in Figure 5?

LC – The one in Figure 4 is the one I wrote during the first ten days of doing the show. What I did with it was recording a “trace” of the material I was developing on stage, practically as long as I was developing it. Every night, after a show, I updated the sheet with a reference to the new ideas that came to me during that night’s show. You must remember, in fact, that I started with 10 minutes of material and a 50-minute slot to fill! The sheet in Figure 5, instead, records ideas that came to me in abstract, so to speak, and that I intended to use during my shows. I started writing it when the show had sort of settled, in an attempt to do what I perceived I needed to do to become a “normal author”, who writes in advance. But at the end most of the ideas on the second sheet stayed on the page and I realised that it was a way of writing comedy that just didn’t work for me.
GP – I think these notes have something hyper-textual about them: I can see some links, but not a predetermined sequence. Is this right?

LC – Yes, apart from the Intro and the Conclusion, which, of course, were always performed at the start and the end of each show. Regarding the links, some were “natural”, at least in my mind, in the sense that maybe a word or a concept from one routine was associated to a word or a concept from another routine and helped me to think of the second and to introduce it to the audience. Don’t forget that, even after the show had “settled”, I still allowed myself 10 minutes dedicated to pure improvisation, during which of course I didn’t know what was going to happen, so this always prevented the show from assuming a too rigid structure.

GP – And there is no correspondent of these sheets in Italian, right?

LC – Correct, because the show was developed in English and performed in English only.

GP – And what about your Italian and English short sets, which, you said, sometimes you translate from English into Italian?

LC – I never write any notes for them, being short sets I don’t feel any need for notes.
Antonello Taurino is an experienced Milan-based Italian comedian, actor and playwright. He also works as a teacher of Italian in scuola media\textsuperscript{111} in Milan. In 2013 he asked me to provide comments and corrections on his own translation of his comedy scripts, in preparation for his first solo show at the Edinburgh Fringe festival. The present interview was recorded in London on 4 March 2015.

GP – First of all, how did you start doing comedy?

AT – I started theatre acting first, initially just because I needed some physical activity and somebody told me of some acting workshop in Lecce that was very physical, then I did some acting at the university and then I ended up creating a comedy trio\textsuperscript{112}, since 1999 to 2001, which was quite successful: we qualified for a competition’s final.

GP – And what type of comedy did you do?

AT – I was already interested in English language comedy, particularly Monty Python, but actually what we were looking for was quality and we knew that it could be found in the Italian tradition as well, think of the cabaret of Enzo Jannacci and Giorgio Gaber. Then I started appearing on the Zelig TV programme, in one form or the other I did from 2003 to 2013.

GP – I understand that you went all the way to the prime time show, right?

AT – Yes, I appeared twice on the prime time show, and around 7-8 times on the late night show. In the meantime, I finished university and the music school and I attended an acting school. The turning point was around 2009-10, when I started doing theatre shows with a narrative theme and some tragic-comic undertones, such as Miles Gloriosus, which is about the Italian soldiers who died from exposure to depleted uranium in Kosovo.

GP – Let’s go back to Zelig a bit. Is it true that there you have those autori, writers, who exercise much control on your material?

\textsuperscript{111} Junior high school.
\textsuperscript{112} Sketch group composed of three performers.
AT – I think that there are a lot of false legends on this subject, I mean the legend of the “bad”
writer who censors your material and so on. We should not forget that the aim of those “labs”
is producing a variety show for the TV, which will go into people’s houses, it’s not them who
decide to come to you, so a bit more of caution must be expected. Some people say that you
can’t find proper satire at Zelig, but you can’t find good jazz at the San Remo song contest
either.

GP – The problem is that it turned out into some sort of a monopoly, don’t you think?

AT – Yes, but the simile still holds: how many people in Italy know that you can do good music
without going to San Remo? In my mother’s view, for instance, if I were a musician, I would
exist as such only if she could see me at San Remo.

GP – So the problem is in the lack of curiosity from the audience in seeking out new forms of
comedy in small clubs and so on, right? Don’t you think there is also a problem in the attitude
of the performers, who themselves are not that available to take the risk of performing in this
type of clubs?

AT – Yes, I think that is where the influence of Zelig has been really negative. Up to the year
2000 or so in Milan there was a huge circuit of live comedy clubs, full of performers who were
not on TV and who wouldn’t say no to it, but who didn’t consider going on it as their main goal.
The real problem is not TV, is the attitude of the comedians towards it, the obsession of doing
all and only what is most likely to bring you to it.

GP – On this subject, Romina Puma told me that if the audience haven’t seen you on TV they
are not really interested in coming to so you live. Do you agree?

AT – Yes, when TV became so central that network of live comedy clubs was drastically
reduced, so those comedians who used to make a living from the live scene were forced to
seek TV exposure. On the other side, for the audience, comedy became “what is shown on that
programme”, with very little awareness of the live scene.

GP – So, what happens to comedians who both appear on Zelig and do their live shows? You
said that TV has inevitably a normalising influence. Does that influence extend to the live shows
from the same comedians?
AT – Here we need to distinguish between different types of comedians who perform live. There is a first group who have been doing comedy live for ages and who never appeared on TV, who struggle but keep doing it. Secondly, there is a type of comedians who, after many years of live experience, brought that experience to their TV career. Then there is a third group that develop their comedy for TV and through TV: people from this group have nothing else than their TV material to perform live.

GP – They are a “prodotto di laboratorio”, a lab produce.

AT – Yes, in both senses of the word. Back to the autori, in my case they never censored me, apart from a single joke, which was about wheel chairs.

GP – This is interesting, since Romina Puma told me about the difficulty of talking about disability on the Italian comedy circuit.

AT – Yes, in fact I advised Romina to convert her set about disability into something for the theatre, where I think it could be very successful, while I don’t see it working as comedy [in Italy].

GP – Why not?

AT – Because on the comedy circuit if you are disabled they look at you with pity, as if you were going for sympathy.

GP – Sorry, I am struggling to understand this point: do you mean that in Italy people don’t trust you to be good as a comedian, if you are disabled, because they think you are there only because you are disabled?

AT – Yes, I think there is an element of it. While the theatre audience, traditionally, are more open to people talking about disability. I saw mediocre shows of that type being successful so, I joked to Romina, it would more so in the case of your show, which can stand on its own legs.

GP – At Zelig you sometimes played a character, called “il Chierico”, “the Cleric”. Where did it originated from? And what’s your opinion on playing a character as opposed to “being yourself”?

AT – Well, I don’t know if I can quote Carmelo Bene...

113 Zelig’s workshops are called “laboratori”, “labs”. 
GP – Go for it, this is a PhD research.

AT – Well, Carmelo Bene said that a character is a chair for paralytic actors. A comedy character, in fact, is a comedy idea turned into a brand, so to speak. It becomes easier to sell and, in fact, it’s characters that [in Italy] work the best on the average audience. However, I think that producing something that conveys you an entire world with so few elements, such as a walk, a catchphrase and a jumper, requires a lot of skill.

GP – So, what about your Cleric character, then?

AT – There is a lot of research behind it. The starting point was the vagrant clerics of the Middle Age, whom I consider the first stand-up comedians. Of course, all forms of expressions are connected to the social situation. I remember the comedian Manos Kanellos saying, in his Edinburgh show: “in Greece we don’t have stand-up because we don’t have the right type of weather for this”, which I found genial, in its apparent triviality. Those vagrant clerics, for instance, did some stuff that was clearly blasphemous but, at the same time, followed the formal rules of the prayers they were mocking. Or they toasted both the Pope and the Emperor at the same time, when they were at war. It was something that required a high level of education and skill and which, for me, represents the proof that humour, since its very origins, represented the highest form of intelligence. So, for me it was a way to express an ideal of “high” comedy, in fact they kept asking me how I managed to bring it to a TV show at all and, although it was on late show and for two seasons only, people still remember it. Pity it never made it to the prime time.

GP – What did you do for the prime time, instead?

AT – I did my “Theatre without conflict” routine: something about what plays would be like if you removed conflict from them. By the way, going back to the Cleric, it was a way of reconnecting with a type of comedy which I considered “high”, but also “caustic”. The character’s clothes intended to express an emotion, more than anything else, the emotion associated with the jokes, which were about saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, they were about feeling a truly mortifying embarrassment. Actually, each joke was from a different point of view, one for instance was about a teacher who scolds a pupil for not writing an assignment about his father and then realises that the pupil’s father is dead, another is about

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114 Also known as Manos the Greek.
somebody saying the wrong thing at a party, and so on, and I couldn’t change character for each of them. The unifying element was the sentiment so I decided to create a character that was the visual embodiment of that sentiment.

GP – And what about stand-up comedy? What role does it play in Italy? How is it seen?

AT – Good, I’m happy I can talk about this, after so many arguments I had in Italy on this very subject! To describe what is going on I invented the expression *misunderstand-up comedy*. First of all, people use in a completely confused way, and as if they were interchangeable, three very different expressions: “comicità anglosassone”\(^{115}\), “satira”\(^{116}\) and “stand-up”. Well, starting from satire, it’s as old as Homer’s *Margites*, of which only fragments survived. It’s interesting that it was completely forgotten in the history of literature. The next stage was the Latin idea of “castiga ridendo mores”\(^{117}\), whose grammar structure makes it clear that the object is the “mores”, the customs, while “ridendo”, “by laughing”, is just the way to achieve that goal. It’s that instrumentality of laughter, in my opinion, what defines satire. There is a verdict from the Corte di Cassazione\(^ {118}\), emitted in 2006, which was practically a translation of that principle. But it does not say “mores rei publicae”, there is no assumption that it *must* deal with politics, those customs can also be the customs of society. Problem is, satire should be about doubt and freedom, so people shouldn’t try to impose their own definition of satire. According to comedian Paolo Rossi, for instance, if something makes everybody laugh is comedy, while if something makes some people laugh and other people angry is satire. This, however, is a definition that works for him, it shouldn’t be made into a rule. Moving to Anglo-Saxon comedy, well, you can’t generalise too much, I mean Benny Hill is part of that too. And then we move to “stand-up”. I must admit that, at first, I fell in the same misunderstanding too. The first time I went to Edinburgh, in 2006 as an actor in a *Hamlet* production, I watched three comedy shows per day, although understanding very little of them. I was so taken by what I saw that I did a solo comedy show with the subtitle “Quasi a stand-up comedy show”\(^{119}\). The media presentation of it stressed the absence of scenery or props, the fact that I was using just a microphone and that I was tackling challenging subjects. I even decided not to include any of

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\(^{115}\) Anglo-Saxon comedy.

\(^{116}\) Satire.

\(^{117}\) “One corrects customs by laughing at them”.

\(^{118}\) The highest law court in Italy.

\(^{119}\) “Almost a stand-up comedy show”.
the material I did on TV, I wanted to be a Taliban of stand-up comedy purity. Now my solo
show, which I played more outside Italy than inside it, has become much more eclectic.

GP – My impression is that in Italy the concept of stand-up has been redefined in order to
oppose it to the mainstream.\textsuperscript{120}

AT – Exactly, we noticed what we did not have and we extrapolated it from everything else
around it.

GP – Maybe that was a needed to compensate what was going on in the mainstream?

AT – Yes, I agree. What we noticed was the satirical aspect of it, which in Italy we didn’t have,
since TV has always been under the direct control of political parties. That does not seem to be
the case in America and the UK where, in most cases, if something works commercially, they
keep it. So, what we liked of stand-up comedy is that it was “caustic”.\textsuperscript{121} It was, indeed, a
misunderstanding, but a productive one as long as it stimulates us to be freer in our expression.

What we need to be careful about is the risk of it becoming a new orthodoxy, which \textit{mandates}
being blasphemous, for instance. It should be a freedom and freedom includes the freedom \textit{not}
to do whatever we are free to do. The underlying of this quality of being “caustic”, however,
was also a marketing decision, for instance for the campaign for the show “Stand Up Comedy”
on Comedy Central\textsuperscript{122}. It became a brand, which said: “We are the ones who do caustic satire”. That’s fair enough, but then you need to have the intellectual honesty of knowing that it’s just
a marketing strategy, instead of reacting with rage at anybody saying, for instance, that in
Anglo-Saxon stand-up comedy there is also room for puns. However, I recognised that all the
best things that came out of Italy were misunderstanding of something taken from abroad.
Futurism, for instance, was a misunderstanding of Surrealism, while opera was a
misunderstanding of ancient Greek theatre, which wasn’t sung, it was accompanied by a form
of monody. So, let’s welcome this misunderstanding, if it’s productive.

GP – If that is a misunderstanding, and I agree with you that it is, in what do you see the
defining feature of stand-up comedy?

\textsuperscript{120} For a more detailed exposition, see the section 5.9
\textsuperscript{121} In the original Italian: “cattiva”.
\textsuperscript{122} This topic is also discussed in section 5.9.
AT – What I understood about stand-up comedy is that it’s not a genre that is can be defined by either theme or style. On a similar problem, in Italy there was a debate about how to define “cabaret”. Flavio Oreglio, the author of the most important book on the subject, tried to define it as a genre, but comedian Alberto Patrucco replied that cabaret is not a genre, it’s a place. Similarly, we can say that stand-up is not a genre, it’s a position in relation to an object, which is the microphone. Nothing more than that. Although, I am coming to the conclusion that what marks a sharp difference between the Anglo-Saxon scene and the Italian one is the attitude of the audience. In Italy, when a comedian is introduced, you can only hear a scatter of polite applause. Here in the UK, and of course even more in the US, the audience go crazy. Then, they proceed to listening with great attention and respect. I need to add that in the UK and the US comedy gigs usually take place in a room that, at least for the duration of the performance, is reserved for that purpose, even if it’s just the function room of a pub. In Italy, instead, with the exception of two or three purpose built comedy clubs, shows usually take place in the main and only room of the venue, in the presence of people who are there not to watch comedy, but to eat, drink and talk to each other, which, in that case, is within their rights to do.

GP – Even if there is an entrance fee?

AT – Unless you are a really big name, in Italy it’s unlikely that you will be able to ask for an entrance fee. So, as I was saying, besides the difference in the logistics, there is a difference in the attitude from the audience. Here in the UK, once I watched people listen with great attention and respect to the comedians, then during the interval I saw them being involved in a brawl with broken bottles and all that and, at the end, I saw them go back to the comedy room and resume their listening respectfully to the comedy. I think the main difference is the respect from the audience for the act of delivering spoken words, which results into a more sympathetic attitude towards the performer. For instance, as you made me notice123, here when you say “my girlfriend left me”, you are pretty sure to receive a sympathetic “awwww” from the audience. In Italy, the audience don’t care at all, at most you can get the heckle “give me her telephone number!” Even the audience of the famed Comedy Store gong show give you a credit of trust, at the start. I think you cannot separate this respect towards the spoken word with the level of political maturity of a given society. It is not by chance that Ancient Greece saw the emergence of Aristophanes during a period of reinforcement of the political

123 In my comments to Taurino’s translation, discussed in section A.4.1.
institutions. You need a cultural and political background that tells you that the spoken word is really important.

GP – Interesting point, it makes me think, for instance, of the Parliamentary-style debating societies you can find here in the UK, which is something I never saw the equivalent of, back in Italy.

AT – Yes, it’s natural that a society with an old tradition of Parliamentary democracy develops a respect for the sacrality of the spoken word, which, instead, is completely lacking in Italy. Indeed, I came to the conclusion that the deep origin of stand-up comedy is in the Speaker’s Corner of Hyde Park in London: you speak and I let you finish, then I verbally destroy you when it’s my turn. It’s this respect towards whoever is speaking that, for me, defines stand-up comedy. So, there are a lot of factors that allowed stand-up to develop: the logistics, the weather, the attitude towards the spoken word and so on, which are very difficult to replicate somewhere else. In my opinion, for us in Italy to do stand-up is like for somebody from Bergamo to play jazz, or for somebody from Veneto to dance pizzica\(^\text{124}\): it’s more than legitimate, particularly in the globalised world we now live in, but we need to be aware that it is not something that our ancestors had in their genes, so to speak.

GP – Changing subject, how do you “write” your material?

AT – I tend to write my jokes word-by-word and then I test them on a satiric website I collaborate with, called Kotiomkin. But I often find that the very same joke produces a completely different response online and live. For instance, there was this joke: “Parliament will discuss a new law against absenteeism, when they manage to reach the quorum”. It got six thousand shares on the website, but it never worked live. So, I write jokes word-by-word but then I improvise the links. That, at least, is what I do for my non-thematic shows. My shows such as the one about depleted uranium, instead, start from the research, then the research leads to the narrative and, at the end, I add the jokes. My ambition, though, is to achieve the same level of thematic unity in all my shows.

GP – What’s the view in Italy about thematic comedy shows?

\(^{124}\) A dance traditional to Salento, in Southern Italy, where Antonello was born and raised before moving to Milan.
AT – In Italy “thematic show” is almost a synonym of “quality comedy show”: to be considered a quality comedian you need to “say something” besides the jokes, and that is usually achieved by connecting the jokes by means of a theme.

GP – That sounds very strange to me. I don’t think you can separate quality and non-quality along those lines. For instance, I consider Steven Wright an absolute genius, one of the greatest comedians of all times, and there is absolutely no connection between his jokes.

AT – Well, in Italy a comedian like Steven Wright would never be considered a quality comedian. That’s the difference.

GP – So there is no room for “one liner” comedians?

AT – We don’t have courage to do that: if you have a joke about a car and one about a wall, you will always go: joke about the car, the car is in a garage, the garage has a wall, joke about the wall. There is always the fiction of a connection. In a non-thematic show, however, the connection will inevitably be very artificial and weak. All the comedians I know in Italy who are specialised in one liners have become “schiaffisti”: those people who, in a TV show, enter the stage, deliver a single joke and leave, maybe to do the same later on. We don’t have the courage to deliver unrelated jokes one after the other. Here in the UK there is nobility recognised in being “stupid”, in nonsense, which I don’t see in Italy. The only comedian who plays with verbal nonsense is Alessandro Bergonzoni, but even he connects his word games with an appearance of thematic structure. When he says: “We are not author, we are authorised”, he’s actually saying a lot, you can trace that theme back to Plato’s “Ion”, so not even his nonsense is nonsense.

GP – What about your first experience with doing comedy in English?

AT – My first experience was in 2012, when I was travelling in Germany and I discovered an open mic gig in English. The most important experience, though, was when I spent a month and a half in New York, for various reasons, including doing some research about depleted uranium, which gained me some physical threats, and attending Susan Batson’s acting school. I performed in comedy shows almost every day, sometimes twice in a day. So, I took all the material I had written up to then and I went through it with the question: “What can work in New York?” Well, I didn’t know that, I only knew what was likely not to work there. So I came
out with a 10 minutes set, which I kept editing, by changing the sequence, the wording and so on. At the end of that month and half I had a strong 15 minutes set in English. I also won two small competitions. The amazing thing in the US is that, by winning one of those competitions, I had the chance to do another comedy show from which they selected comedians for David Letterman’s TV show... that was six days after my arrival! The problem in the US is that it is mandatory for this type of show to bring paying friends, and actually the more of them you bring, the longer you are allowed to perform. Not knowing that, I prepared an 8-minute set, but I brought only one friend (who, by the way, spent $30 between entrance and mandatory drink), which gave me the right to perform only for 4 minutes. I, then, had to shorten and rearrange my set at the last minute and the result was a disaster, so I blew up my chance for the Letterman show. But I was amazed by the chance itself, as opposed to what happens in Italy, where everything is much slower and much more based on “whom you know”.

GP – What was your material about?

AT – Mainly about the misunderstanding between cultures, about the fact, for instance, that they ask you what they should wear if they decide to come to Italy. Addressing these misunderstandings is always the easiest way to connect across cultures, they are easily recognisable and they can be used to establish a connection from the very start.

GP – And what about your relationship with the English language?

AT – That’s terrible. I should come here [to London] more often, or participate in John Peter Sloan’s comedy night in English in Milan. On the other hand, my difficulties with English can be an advantage, because it means that I need to work hard on editing and selecting my material in English. So, my English material tends to be sparse, but better selected and edited than my Italian one.

GP – Is all your English material a selection from the Italian? Did you ever develop jokes directly in English?

AT – Yes, usually in the case of observations made abroad. Here in London, for instance, I performed this joke: “It’s easy to recognise Italians in London: they are those that they are wearing sunglasses even when it’s cloudy”. I then did it in Italy and discovered that it works there too, so I guess this is a case of translation in the opposite direction.
GP – What about wordplay?

AT – I don’t do much of it in English, since most of my material is a translation from the Italian, so the jokes based on wordplay don’t pass through the translation filter. In Italian, instead, I do some wordplay, even in my theatre shows, in a supposedly “noble” context, so in a context where you shouldn’t find them.

GP – Do those shows have a strong comic element?

AT – Yes, the show about the false Modigliani sculptures in Livorno is obviously comic, in the sense that the story itself is hilarious. The one about the tragedy of depleted uranium starts with 10 minutes that are absolutely comic. The main characters are two actors who want to do a show of teatro civile, but discover that all the main tragedies have already been exploited by Marco Paolini, so they choose the tragedy of depleted uranium. They are the typical comedy double act, such as Laurel and Hardy, but actually they are also Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in the sense that the first still believes in teatro civile, but the second is cynical about it. The show was written when teatro civile as a genre was dying, in the sense that it had become a genre among others, with its rules, it was not breaking any ground any longer. So, as Marx said, parody is the way in which we say goodbye to a form. You know, “comedy is tragedy plus time”... and, as Simon Amstell correctly pointed out, “plus jokes”. So, Don Quixote is the way we said goodbye, through parody, to the form of chivalric novels, which once were taken seriously.

GP – I didn’t know that theory of parody, where can I find it?

AT – I found it in Auerbach’s Mimesis, in the chapter about Don Quixote. So, my show Miles Gloriosus was the comic farewell to the season of teatro civile. The comic part constitutes probably 30% of the show. By the way, we did the show in front of relatives of the victims, so even that 30% could have sounded strange, but fortunately they took it the right way. But a thematic show in Italy will probably never be a show of pure thematic stand-up comedy, since people expect certain production values and expect some “proper acting”.

125 “Civic theatre”, i.e. theatre with a “civic conscience”, which aims to uncover and denounce some problems in society.
126 I read that chapter but I couldn’t find any reference to that theory.
GP – Let’s move to talking about your solo show in English at the Edinburgh Fringe 2013. I must admit that, given your very limited experience with performing in English back then, I found it a very brave move.

AT – Yes, I had only my 15 minutes developed in America, plus an extra 5 minutes I developed during a few days’ visit to London. By the way, it was a bit of a nightmare, since I had arrived a few days earlier, which I was planning to spend on the preparation of the show, including some pronunciation training with my roommate, instead the venue wasn’t ready so I had to spend those days removing old furniture and dead mice.

GP – On that subject, I saw your show at the end of the run and I found that it worked well, but people who saw you at the beginning told me that you were struggling. Do you confirm?

AT – Yes, absolutely.

GP – What did you have to do to “fix” it during the run?

AT – I worked mainly on my pronunciation, which was the weakest link.

GP – I also heard that some jokes were considered offensive, particularly some about the Jews.

AT – Yes, but I was also mocking the Arabs, the Scots, the Italians... At the end I think that it all boils down to the difficulties with the language and, in particular, with the problems with my pronunciation. I guess there was a loss of status and credibility, so to speak, which meant that the audience were less ready to “forgive” me for saying something “edgy”.

GP – I read a review according to which your show was seen here as “old style”. I noticed a certain number of “canned jokes” and jokes about ethnic groups to which you don’t belong, things that are usually both associated to the type of comedy that was mainstream before the Alternative Comedy revolution of the ‘80s.

AT – Yes, but sorry to insist, most of that review was about the fact that understanding me was difficult. If people struggle to understand, it’s very difficult to convey the quality and the value or what you are trying to do.

GP – What I noticed about the script if that your English tends to be very “standard”, very poor in those colloquial and idiomatic expressions that often gives “flavour” to the spoken English of stand-up comedy.
Absolutely, it means that the only jokes that can work, in my case, are those whose strength relies on their meaning only, not on the language or on how they are delivered. For instance, I have this joke: “I have a twin brother who is so stupid that every year forgets my birthday”. That joke will work in any language. It’s also very simple, so there is no need for “colour”. They are a type of joke for which the “what” is more important than the “how”. That is the reason why I tend to choose jokes of this type for my shows in English.

Of course, behind the problem of language, there is the problem of cultures. For instance, in the last script you sent me for comments, there is a bit when you say your girlfriend is a Miss World contestant. I advised you to add something along the lines of “I know it’s difficult to believe”, given the strong intolerance of the British audience against what might sound like “bragging”.

Yes, thanks for suggesting that, I delivered that joke yesterday and your caveat really helped. Going back to the review, I think the review read my playing with Italian stereotypes as an attempt to debunk them that didn’t work, but that was never my intention. For me, stereotypes were just the easiest way to reach out to the audience, without any ambition to be original.

Some other parts of your material are very original and ambitious, though. For instance, you sent me a routine about some philosophers, some of which quite obscure, and I had to warn you that knowledge of history of philosophy is less common here in the UK than in Italy, where it is taught at high school.

Yes, in Italy I have the reputation of someone who always tries to do something that is intellectually ambitious. I often do a show with a philosopher friend, where we discuss Lacan and the like. But we make fun of our own intellectual pretension. In Italy everybody knows the episode from that Fantozzi movie in which Fantozzi is forced, by his cinephile office boss, to watch the classic film “Battleship Potemkin” when on TV they are showing an Italy-England football match. Well, once, when Italy-England was again on TV, we organised a night in which we showed “Battleship Potemkin” and then we did our show, which was some sort of mock philosophical discussion about the film.

I find that a genius idea! How did it go?

127 Comedy character played by Paolo Villaggio and representing the embodiment of the low status office worker.
Nobody came to see “Battleship Potemkin”, but we had quite a good turnout at the show afterwards, which we started by mocking the uneducated Italian audience who prefer to watch Italy-England over a masterpiece in the history of cinema. Then we moved to doing jokes on Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and things like that. So, in Italy too there is a tension between our desire to talk about certain subjects and the openness of the audience to them. Here, maybe, in some cases, like the one you mentioned, the contrast is even stronger. Again, in Italy there is a misunderstanding about the situation in the Anglo-Saxon comedy world, which is idealised as a world in which everybody does “high” comedy. For instance, the other day an Italian comedian told me that in the Anglo-Saxon world no comedian becomes famous by doing wordplay only, which is clearly not true.

That is really strange. Moreover, I consider wordplay a noble art. Where do you think that the prejudice against it comes from?

I guess it’s because it’s too easy to do bad wordplay. In Italy there seems to be no middle ground: we have awful puns and then we have somebody like Bergonzoni. I saw a routine entirely based on very silly puns based on the name of the fashion designers. It’s a vicious circle: on one side, they do this kind of very low level wordplay, on the other, this fills the prejudice against wordplay and prevents better comedians from even trying to do something better with it. Back to the different attitude of the audience towards Anglo-Saxon stand-up comedy, another interesting aspect is that the greater respect for the performer I was talking about before is associated with the recognition of a smaller gap between their performances and real life. What comedians say on stage is not that different from what they tell you at the bar after the show. This reminds me of when, in America, I did a joke the setup of which was that the night before I had an adventure with a girl from Kentucky. After the show, an audience member asked me from what part of Kentucky she was and was dismayed at hearing that it didn’t really happen, he felt that his trust was betrayed. In Italy, even the worst comedians make an effort to “build” their act. I find that a greater distance from real life is something actually quite positive, in the sense that comedians are offering an alternative to it. Regardless of whether you consider that positively or negatively, though, there is no doubt that in Italy comedians need to make more of an effort. What I find puzzling is how it can be possible that, in the Anglo-Saxon world, the comedians command more respect, not less, even if they make a much smaller effort to be different from their audience.
GP – I think you raised a very interesting point. Maybe this can be read in terms of the “power distance” dimension of culture\textsuperscript{128}. I mean, it seems to me that in Italy comedians need to present themselves as figures of authority, either because they have appeared on TV or because they are supposed to have skills that the audience don’t have. In the Anglo-Saxon word, instead, the key seems to be identification: when they happen to like you, it is often because you are saying something they can relate to, in a way or the other. So, maybe here people respect comedians more than in Italy not despite the fact that comedians are less distant from them, but because of it. It’s a narcissistic respect, so to speak.

AT – Yes, that might be a factor at play.

GP – Moreover, here in the UK (in the US this probably will not apply), people tend to be very reserved about their emotions and personal issues, so they tend to admire comedians for their openness: the “special skill” that comedians seem to have is their ability to open up. Maybe the fact that in Italy people tend to expresses themselves more openly results into a less central role assigned to the “safe haven” for self-expression offered by comedy. Do you agree?

AT – Yes, I see your point. Back to the subject of language, a difficulty I have found is that, as you know, one of the “rules” of comedy is that the word that is supposed to produce laughter needs to be put at the end, but I found that this is more difficult to do in English than in Italian, since the English language seems to impose stricter rules on the sequence of words. For instance, I had a joke about a “green wall”, in which the funny part is that the wall was green, but in English you can’t say “wall green”.

GP – You could say “a wall, which happens to be green”.

AT – Yes, but it means that you have to change the entire structure of the sentence. Going back to the problem of the misunderstanding in Italy of Anglo-Saxon stand-up comedy, another reason for it is that people only know the “giants” of the genre. It would be like judging Italian comedy only from Dario Fo, Paolo Rossi, Daniele Luttazzi without the plagiarism, Beppe Grillo without the political deviations and Roberto Benigni without the Catholic deviations. However, the way most people experience comedy in their own country is not from watching these “giants”, who are difficult to see live and don’t appear that often on TV. The comparison between the two comedy traditions, then, becomes heterogeneous and unfair. When, instead,

you come to the UK or the US and you experience comedy live, you discover that not all comedians are like George Carlin, Bill Hicks and Doug Stanhope, but you can also find, for instance, the sublime stupidity of a Tim Vine. On the other hand, I must admit, Tim Vine is not Martufello\textsuperscript{129}.

GP – Who is Martufello?

AT – [laughs heartily] We should end the interview with this, you can’t top that.

\textsuperscript{129} A comedian very popular in Italy, apparently.
A.4.1 Commentary on my collaboration with Antonello on his English translation of comedy material

As mentioned in the introduction to the interview, Antonello Taurino asked me to provide comments and corrections to the English translation of his comedy scripts, in preparation for his first solo show at the Edinburgh Fringe festival in 2013. He sent me a 7,000 word electronic document, constituting the script in English of what Antonello was planning to perform as a one-hour show. He had done the original translation by himself, hence it clearly constitutes an instance of self-translation on which I was asked to comment, as opposed to the request to provide a complete allographic translation. Moreover, Antonello never sent me the Italian source text. That it was indeed a case of translation, however, is confirmed by what Antonello told me during the interview about how he originally developed this material in the course of many years of performing in Italy. Contrary to what happens in the case of an allographic translation, however, the validity I was asked to check was not in any way supposed to consist in the putative “equivalence” of the target text with a source text. Instead, I was asked to comment on a) the formal correctness of the translation and b) its comedic effectiveness, in the light of my greater experience with performing in front of a British audience. The absence of a source text, in any case, turned out to be a problem in those cases when the text was so obscure that the translator’s communicative (and, particularly, comedic) intention was difficult to reconstruct. One of my most frequent comments, in fact, was: “non mi suona chiarissima: qual’è l’originale italiano?” A sample of the original text from Antonello with the original comments from me (highlighted by means of the Microsoft Word revision tools) is shown in the following picture, which reproduces the opening of the script / show:

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130 During the interview, Antonello described his writing technique in Italian as consisting of writing jokes “word-by-word” but living the links to the improvisation (at least where his comedy shows are concerned, as opposed to his more thematic “theatre shows”). The script in English, on the contrary, includes not only links but even salutations, as it is shown further down in Figure 6. Antonello, then, seems to follow in that category of comedians for whom the translation into a second language is also a translation from a more “oral” form of expression to a more “scripted” one (at least in the intention and/or in the way to prepare for the performance, in the sense that there is no guarantee that the performance will “follow” the script in any particularly “strict” way). As is argued in section 5.3, this might be associated with the level of competence with regard to the second language, which in this case was very low.

131 This is consistent with the “authorial freedom” attributed to self-translation by many authors, particularly Fitch (1988). See section 2.4 for a discussion.

132 “This sentence does not sound very clear to me: what’s the original”? An instance of this comment can be seen in Figure 6.
Hello!

How are you? How are you doing? Are you ok?

I’m Antonello, and even if I’m badly dressed, I’m Italian. If I walked in Italy dressed like this, I would be immediately arrested by Prada Police. I apologize for my English, but in any case you will get from me much more than what I usually understand when Italian politicians speak on TV.

Thank you for coming to my show, you will be witnessing an extraordinary monologue, unique in the world. Someone will say: “It’s not true. If it was so extraordinary, why are we so few?” You are not a few, you have been selected.

I’ll introduce myself: I’m an actor and a comedian, so I’m a multifarious [c’ poco usato, magari sarebbe meglio “versatile”, pronunciato “versatili”] artist (funny while acting drama, serious while working as comedian, but these are details). As an actor, I studied the Strasberg and the Stanislavszij method. You know, sense memories, personification, childhood traumas… I’m so good in this acting technique that in order to cry at my mother’s funeral, I have to think first of the whole Hamlet trouble [meglio “tribulations”]. At the beginning it’s very hard: you must work your way up starting from scratch [meglio “from the bottom”] rende meglio l’idea della procrastination e si abbia meglio a “way up”. But maybe I started way too much from scratch: I used to play as walk-on actor in-on the Radio, and my first show was so terrible that even my relatives, who got in with a free ticket, asked for reimbursement in compensation. The kindest review said: “A rant from the stage disturbing the mobile-phones’ ringing in the room” [fong mi suona chiarissima, qual è l’origine italiano?]. So, if you enjoy the show tonight, please tomorrow send your

Figure 6: Screenshot of Taurino’s English translation of his script with comments and revisions.

Apart from the corrections (for instance, “abortion” for “miscarriage”, an error due to the fact that both terms in Italian are translated by the same term, i.e. “aborto”) and the requests of clarification, most of the comments regarded cultural references and, in particular, cases in which the assumption of a shared knowledge with the audience might, in my judgement, not be completely justified. A joke, for instance, based on the idea that people need to wait three hours to go swimming after a meal, prompted me to suggest the addition of “in Italy people think that...” 133.

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133 A brief internet search of articles in English on this popular belief has now showed me that, in this case, I might have been too cautious. A further quick check with my supervisors, however, revealed that in France the number of hours that people are supposed to wait is two, while in Greece is four! The impression that this belief might be culture-specific, at least in the details of its content, was probably right. My comment, however, originated first of all from the recognition that people in Italy tend to be more hypochondriac (or, according to their point of view, health conscious) than people in Britain. The clarification, then, can also be seen as the suggestion to humorously target this cultural difference.
The reversal of this can be seen in comments aimed at making Antonello more conscious of possible unexpected cultural references, so to speak, or, given that the term “reference” seems to carry an implicit connotation of intentionality, of some unexpected culture-dependent associations in the minds of the audience. One joke, for instance, was about a hypothetical musical theatre show on the gestures of Adolf Hitler, which prompted me to comment: “Questa assomiglia molto alla trama di The Producers… sara’ il caso di fare un accenno?” In a further case, Antonello’s unawareness of a possible association in the audience member’s mind might have made the setup of the joke factually wrong and its punch line comically ineffective. In this specific case, the joke, arguably from the time of Antonello’s residence in New York, was about the fact that the main airport of that city is dedicated to John Fitzgerald Kennedy and on imagining a Jackie now-Onassis travelling through it: “Let’s think: how could it be leaving from an airport named after your ex-husband? No European could never [sic] have this sensation: living [sic] from an airport entitled to one of your relatives, because the closest person [sic] an airport has been named after is John Paul the Second!” This prompted the comment: “Tieni conto pero’ che l’aeroporto di Liverpool e’ dedicato a John Lennon”. The mismatch of culture-dependent references, then, can happen in either direction: sometimes it can be the audience who “knows too much”, so to speak, although, of course, it is always the comedian’s / translator’s responsibility to strive for the best possible representation of the audience’s cultural environment.

A further type of comment is constituted by observations aimed at making Antonello aware of certain rules or expectations of behaviour that are typical of the performer / audience interaction as it occurs in the UK. For instance, the line “my girl dumped me” prompted the following comment: “non so se e’ lo stesso in Italia ma in GB in questi casi c’e’ la tradizione che il pubblico faccia ‘ahhhhh’, come ad esprimere compassione… e’ una convenzione con cui si puo’ giocare, per esempio iniziano l’ ‘ahhhh’ tu stesso se il pubblico non reagisce”. Similarly,

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134 “This has a clear resemblance with the plot of The Producers… don’t you think you should refer to it?”
135 “Be aware that Liverpool’s airport is dedicated to John Lennon.”
136 “I don’t know if in Italy it’s the same, but here in GB the tradition is that the audience will respond with an ‘awwww’ to express their sympathy… it’s a convention you can play with, for instance by initiating the ‘awwww’ yourself if there is no reaction”. Antonello discusses this same “tradition” in his interview.
a “stage direction” indicating the display of a picture of a naked woman prompted the suggestion to check the audience rating for the show\textsuperscript{137}.

Finally, further comments were aimed at a more effective formulation of Antonello’s comedic ideas. For instance, one routine is based on the idea that Jesus’s original message of tolerance was misunderstood due to the absence, at his time, of microphones and amplifiers. In Antonello’s original script, Jesus says “Priests should have women and enjoy the cherry”, which gets misunderstood as “Priests should hate women and never marry”. This prompted the following comment, with reference to what Jesus’s “original line”: “Questa non mi suona tanto... per ‘cherry’ intendi il liquore? Allora andrebbe senza articolo. Ma forse si puo’ fare di meglio: che ne dici di ‘should have women and be merry’?”\textsuperscript{138} Other comments were themselves semi-humorous, with the humorous idea expressed in the comment often then used to suggest further jokes (the humour of the meta-text was transferred to the text, so to speak). For instance, a joke about Nazi “lagers”\textsuperscript{139}, prompted the following comment: “meglio ‘concentration camps’, se no pensano alla birra, soprattutto in Scozia... potresti anche farla come battuta”\textsuperscript{140}.

\textsuperscript{137} From what then I witnessed in Edinburgh, that action caused some embarrassment and tension in the audience, probably due to the fact that in British culture images of female nakedness are more likely to be associated with the idea of “objectification”.

\textsuperscript{138} “This one doesn’t sound right to me... do you mean the liquor, with ‘cherry’? [Actually it would have been “sherry”] In that case you should remove the article. [I know realise that Antonello might have meant something completely different, as in the expression “popping the cherry”] But maybe you can do better: what do you think of ‘should have women and be merry’?”

\textsuperscript{139} Antonello seems to have a bit of an obsession for all things related to the Nazis and the Holocaust, which, as he discusses during the interview, in Edinburgh was sometimes misunderstood.

\textsuperscript{140} “Better ‘concentration camps’, otherwise they might think that you are talking about beer, particularly in Scotland... actually, you might make a joke of that”.
Federica Bonomi is, in terms of comedy experience, one of the most “junior” members of the London Puma group of London-based Italian comedians. The present interview was recorded on 21 March 2015 in London, when Federica was visiting briefly after having returned to Italy six months before. At the time of writing (May 2015), though, Federica was again based in London.

GP – Did you start doing stand-up comedy in Italy or in the UK?

FB – Here in the UK.

GP – What brought you to it?

FB – Curiosity, I would say. In Italy I did mainly theatre and discovered stand-up comedy via videos on YouTube, such as those from Eddie Izzard. So I decided to try to do something new and which, at the beginning, seemed to me easier than playing a character. At the end, though, it turned out to be much more difficult.

GP – Why was that?

FB – I think it was because of my theatre background. In theatre, in fact, you always have a fourth wall, which protects you, in a sense. Stand-up comedy, instead, is the opposite: you need to establish a direct relationship with the audience. In stand-up comedy, when things are not working you can actually feel that during your set, so you need to be able to deal with it and to react to it.

GP – Did you start in English or in Italian?

FB – I started in English, then after three or four performances I met Romina Puma and she gave me the chance to do it in Italian too.

GP – And did you do the same material?

FB – No, because my set in English was all about me being an Italian in London, while at the London Puma I spoke about whatever came to my mind: politics, economics, religion, all sort of
things. Moreover, I developed a completely surreal routine about my upbringing. In Italian, I’ve always felt freer to improvise.

GP – And did you ever do the opposite? I mean, transferring into Italian material you had previously done in English?

FB – A few times, when I had material without specific references to the Italian culture. Sometimes I simply change the references. For instance, I had this routine about bungee jumping. In Italian, I compared it to medieval tortures and to the world of the Catholic Church, while in English I used a completely different comparison, because I didn’t think that the original references were clear enough to an English audience.

GP – What can you say about your writing process? Do you write word-by-word or by “bullet points” or how else?

FB – It depends on the language. In Italian I only write some general notes, in English I write the punch lines down to be sure that I learn them properly, particularly if they can only work with a very specific word, which I need to be sure to remember and pronounce correctly.

GP – Later you moved back to Italy and you started doing stand-up comedy there. How did you find that change?

FB – It was very difficult, because in Italy there is still not much awareness of stand-up comedy. At the end, with great effort, I convinced the manager of a venue to give it a try as some sort of experiment.

GP – So you found that this “resistance” tends to come from the venue managers more than from the audience?

FB – Definitely. Most audience members, after all, have probably heard of George Carlin, Bill Hicks and, now for sure, Robin Williams. The venue managers, on the other hand, are nervous, because they don’t know how to promote stand-up comedy. My argument to them was: why don’t we try with the people who come to the venue anyway, plus some people I know and I can invite to the event? The idea of an event that is not completely planned is something that venue managers really struggle to accept.
GP – Yes, I guess here in the UK we can write outside a pub “On Thursday stand-up comedy” and most people will know what to expect, right?

FB – Yes, while in Italy I had to write this leaflet, in which the stand-up comedy night was defined as “A night of mostly improvised comedy delivered with the hope of producing some laughter…”

GP – That’s great, can you please send me an electronic copy?

FB – Sure, I will. The main message, though, was: it’s an evening in which you are expected to laugh.

GP – Your description made me think of the fact that the Italian culture is often described as risk-adverse. Do you agree?

FB – Yes, definitely. It’s the same with the theatre scene. In Brescia, for instance, if you want to do something it will probably need to be either in dialect or to be the classic comedy of errors about the husband, the wife and the lover, you know, the usual things. People will still fill the theatre because they will know in advance what to expect. And it’s reassuring for the actors too, since they know how those things are expected to be performed.

GP – So, given these premises, how did your show go?

FB – Again, my biggest problem was the organisers themselves. Before starting, I explained to them how it was supposed to work, that I need silence, I explained the rules about heckling… but when we started they kept serving food and passing in front of me, then they started loading the dishwasher, cleaning the coffee machine…

GP – What do you mean with “the rules about heckling”?

FB – I explained, not only to the organisers, but also to the audience, that if they interrupted me while I was doing my show, they would “become game”, it would become an open confrontation to establish who is the strongest.

GP – It’s interesting that you explained that as part of the “rules”, while in the UK heckling is, at least “officially”, so to speak, considered a transgression to the rules. I mean, we all know that it’s actually part of the game, that as you said it has its own rules, but we never make that...
explicit, we like to pretend that it happens *against* the rules, probably in order not to spoil the aura of transgression around it.

FB – Yes, but in Italy I couldn’t *assume* that all that was implicit knowledge, so I was worried of reacting to a heckler and the heckler taking my reaction very badly. So I said: these are the rules, I explained them to you, now if you don’t understand them that’s not my fault.

GP – And how did it work? Did they laugh?

FB – Yes, in general they did. The parts that worked the best, though, were the improvised parts.

GP – What was your choice of subjects?

FB – I linked together all the bits I had developed so far, including those I did in London, about my work experience there and about the culture differences. At the end, I tried to close with my decision of going back to Italy and with the positive message deriving from it.

GP – So the message was along the lines of “the neighbour’s grass is not actually greener”?

FB – Yes, but it was a bit more problematic than that, since I also confessed my desire to eventually return to London.

GP – And how do you think people in Italy look at the experience of those Italians who decide to go abroad?

FB – I think they look at it in a very supportive way: I heard people of a certain age saying that they would “push” their children or grandchildren to do the same. I also heard people saying: I appreciate young people who try to achieve something here in Italy, but at that same time I really don’t understand while they haven’t left yet.

GP – We are not seen as “traitors”, then?

FB – No, I would say more as role models. Nowadays, in Italy there is feeling that you don’t have any chance to realise original projects, that you can’t find a job, that you can’t do anything at all, almost. If this is the way you see things, then those who stay can only be seen as stupid. Maybe this specific point of view is associated with the fact that Brescia is an industrial city that, as such, saw better times, and also sometimes with the point of view of a generation that experienced a completely different level of job security. The funny bit is that maybe they
expect a place like London to offer more security, while we know that security is not what the British way of life is about.

GP – Yes, I think it's more about a trade-off of security for opportunities. Going back to your show, how did you find the venue?

FB – I heard that this venue hosted literature readings, mainly classics, such as Greek classics. One night the guy who performed these readings was busy, I heard about that through common friends, so I proposed my show to fill the gap, saying that it would be an experiment.

GP – So selling a night of stand-up comedy to a venue manager was more difficult than selling a night of readings of Greek classics?

FB – Yes, because in the case of readings not much is expected from the audience, while stand-up comedy implies a higher level of involvement. People seemed scared of being asked questions, for instance.

GP – Interesting, it sounds like one more symptom of the risk-adversity that is often attributed to Italy\textsuperscript{142}, then. And what are the parts that worked the best and the least?

FB – As I said before, the parts that worked the best were those in which I improvised while reacting to what was happening in the room, such as the waiter passing in front of me. The parts that worked the least, instead, were the political ones. I didn’t have much political material, but I thought I couldn’t avoid the subject all together, because a new President of the Republic had just been elected. I think the problem is that in Italy people laugh or don’t laugh at political jokes according to their political allegiance. It’s a bit like with satire, which has always a clear political agenda, while I think it should always be against power, regardless of who in a particular moment is in power.

\textsuperscript{142} For instance by Hofstede (1991).
Figure 7: Poster for Bonomi’s show in Italy.

Literal translation of the poster’s text: “Evening of stand-up comedy, experimental, to be seen, improvised, solo-show [in order ] to have big laughs in company”.
The first time I met the Canadian performer Katsura Sunshine (real name Greg Robic) was at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2014, when I went to see his show, in which he presented the traditional Japanese art form of storytelling Rakugo. In their very well-documented monographic study on the subject, Morioka & Sasaki (1990:8) propose the following definition: “in a narrow sense, a rakugo story can be defined as a short, humorous story ending in a punch line”, to which they add that “in a broader sense” this definition also includes serious and usually longer stories, such as ghost stories (1990:9). The Rakugo performed by Katsura Sunshine corresponds to the “narrow sense” of that definition. A story from the performance I saw in Edinburgh involves, for example, different variations, of increasing complexity, of the following narrative structure: a character relates some information about another person (in an instance, that he hit and hurt his head), but the name of this person happens to be so long that, at the end of the conversation, the information has already become irrelevant (for instance, “his name was so long, that his head is fine now”). Even more than from the punch line, the humour of this specific story seemed to originate from the great skills (including memory skills) displayed by the storyteller in reporting the overlong list of names, and from the sense of absurdity associated with its length, which in the English performance I saw in Edinburgh was complemented by the sense of incongruity from the rest of the narration produced by the choice to leave the names in their original Japanese. Another story, included in the same performance, revolved around a man of mediocre intelligence, beauty and status who dies and gets offered the chance to be reincarnated. He gets asked to make a series of dichotomic choices, such as whether he wants to become a man or a woman, and by a process of exclusion (all the prima facie most appealing choices, in fact, seem to come with very onerous “terms and conditions”) he ends up reincarnated into the his very same mediocre self. All these stories were narrated by Katsura Sunshine while sitting on a cushion (Rakugo is often called, half in jest, “sit-down comedy”) on a bare stage, dressed in a kimono and with the help

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143 Rakugo is a one-person (usually a one-man) performance art, but it involves an extensive use of direct speech, in which the performer takes turns, so to speak, to embody the different characters of the story, “a narrative technique [that] somewhat resembles a telephone conversation observed by a third person” (Morioka & Sasaki 1990:40). In Western stand-up comedy this technique is used extensively, for instance, by Eddie Izzard, but other comedians prefer to use indirect speech, maybe in order to underline, with that choice, that the narration originates from the personal point of view of the comedians themselves.
of the only two props allowed by the traditional rules of Rakugo: a fan and a towel. In the following interview (collected in London on 2 December 2014, during a brief tour of the UK), Katsura Sunshine explains not only how and why he became a performer of Rakugo, but also what are the main constituents of this art form. Further clarifications, with reference to some of the literature on the subject, are offered in the notes, in which the potential theoretical implications of the points raised by the interview are also discussed.

GP – How and why did you become a Rakugo performer?

KS – I was writing theatre in Toronto, based on Aristophanes, the ancient Greek comedy playwright, and I happened to read a scholarly paper according to which ancient Greek comedy and tragedy, on one hand, and Japanese No and Kabuki, on the other, had a lot of coincidental similarities. So I thought it would be interesting for me to see No and Kabuki, since the line connecting us with Greek theatre disappeared for a while, with the result that now we can only imagine what it was really like, but No and Kabuki are performed in the same way today as when they were first developed. So I went to Japan with the intention of spending there six months, but I loved it and I stayed. In my fifth year, when I was able to speak some Japanese, I saw a Rakugo performance for the first time and I loved it. I found in it everything I like about Japan: the kimonos, the cushions, the lanterns, the music...

GP – Can you give a brief description of the structure of a Rakugo performance?

KS – Yes, a Rakugo show always starts with the storyteller introducing himself and doing a bit of his own material, just like in a stand-up comedy show, and then launching into the telling of the stories he has learned from his master, and his master from his master and so on, which have been passed down orally for, in some cases, hundreds of years. I thought: this is the perfect art form, it has everything, it has the tradition, it has the possibility of adding your own contribution and it’s funny.

GP – Seen from the point of view of stand-up comedy, Rakugo looks much more scripted. Is it really the case? If yes, do you have much room for improvisation and audience interaction?

KS – You are absolutely right, the “bits” are scripted, but the sequence and the choice of which “bits” to include, and how to connect them, might depend on the audience and on where I want to take them during that particular performance. Thinking better, the actual “bits” are not
as much scripted as they are... done so many times. They are basically scripted in here [he
points a finger to his right temple]. My master never tells the same story twice the same
way, it’s not that he improvises, but he might choose different words, he might change the
tempo, the pace, the timing.

GP – Are all those stories you are telling from your master and the tradition? Or you are writing
new ones?

KS – There are three patterns. First, there are the traditional stories, which you learn from your
master or the other masters, in fact you can actually go to any master you want. Those might
be hundreds years old and every storyteller performs them. Secondly, there are people like my
master who writes his own stories. He has around 240-250 of them. So, his apprentices tell a
lot of his stories as well, which we can only learn from him. Other masters too come to him and
ask him if they can do his stories, so there is a lot of sharing going on. Lastly, there are your
own original stories.

GP – How does that sharing happen? By observing the performances?

KS – Yes, we can watch the stories live or we can get a recording. Typically, a master will give
you two or three different recorded versions of the same story. You choose the version you
like, you memorise it and you go back to the master, who then gives you recommendations on
what to change and what to keep and, at the end, he gives you the approval, at which point

144 This seems to offer some corroboration to the notion of “mental text” proposed in section 2.1.9 of the present
study. Novograd also describes Rakugo as having “neither script not author” (1974:189) and comparing it for that
reason to *Commedia dell’arte* (Ibid.).

145 An analysis of the differences between two different performances of the same story by the same storyteller is
offered by Sweeney (1979), who also offers an interesting description of the process of variation and, in his
terminology, “crystallisation”) by means of which a performer develops the style and content of his performances:
“the pupil’s rendering of a tale is unlikely to be a carbon copy of his teacher’s. Indeed, he is encouraged to adapt
to suit his own personality. Eventually his version of the tale will crystallise in his mind, and from that point he is
unlikely to make any radical changes to his presentation” (1979:48).

146 Another storyteller, Yanagiya Tsubame, is quoted by Novograd (1974:189) as saying: “the scripts that we
perform exactly as we get them are almost nil. What we storytellers do is to add meat to them, cover them with
skin, then paint in the eyebrows. What with changing the text over and over again, there are times it almost
disappears”. Strangely, the author of that study does not seem to see any contradiction between this quote and
the assertion, quoted below, according to which Rakugo has “neither script nor author” (Ibid.), as if variations
could exist without something they are variations “on” or an “almost disappearing” might occur without
something performing the (almost) disappearing act. As argued in section 2.3, only a theoretical model that that
recognises the presence of some sort of “invariant core” behind these variations/(almost)disappearances can do
justice to the particular nature of oral art forms such as stand-up comedy, *Commedia dell’arte* or Rakugo.

147 This seems to be connected to the suggestion, proposed in section 2.3, that a single recording is an incomplete
representation of a piece of material, since it does not document what is invariant and what is not between
different performances of it.
you have the right to perform the story. Now I want to start writing my own stories, but I’m mostly interested in doing my master’s stories and, secondly, I’m interested in doing the traditional stories.

GP – When do you gain the right to write new stories?

KS – Most people don’t write their own stories during their apprenticeship, which lasts three years. But I’m in my seventh year now, so I can. However, if I want to do the traditional stories I still need permission from a master, it doesn’t matter which master, while if I want to do my master’s stories I need permission from him.

GP – Moving to the subject of language, what was your level of proficiency in Japanese when you moved to Japan?

KS – Initially, zero. When I first saw Rakugo, though, I had been there for five years and I could speak a bit of Japanese. Then there was a three year gap before my master took me, in which I kept watching Rakugo performances and studying them on my own. So, when I started the apprenticeship my Japanese wasn’t too bad, but during the apprenticeship I had to learn many new polite forms, so my Japanese improved the most during those three years.

GP – Do you think you will write your new stories directly in Japanese?

KS – Of course, although I want to bring a Japanese art to the audience, who is more interested in the traditional element of it, so it is important for me to try to transmit that traditional element. But the first half of every performance, the stand-up comedy-like introduction, is all “mine” anyway, so I don’t feel any need to make all of my performance original. Again, the traditional material is what the audience are there to hear.

GP – When you translate those traditional stories into English, are you the first translator?

KS – I think so, there might be a couple of stories, out of my master’s 250 stories, that have already been translated, but for most of them I’m the first translator.

GP – What do you think are the challenges involved in this translation?

KS – At first I thought it would be very challenging and then I realised that it was a mistake. I was thinking: “How can I make Rakugo stories accessible for an English audience? Do I need to make some arrangements so make them accessible?” So, I made some arrangements and...
performed the resulting version in Canada. For instance, in a Japanese grade six mathematics problem, you have cranes and turtles. I thought that cranes were not an animal so prominent in the Canadian imagination, so I changed it to flamingos and turtles. But it didn’t go as well as I was expecting. Then I realised that maybe I shouldn’t make any arrangement at all. So, I did my master’s stories as close as possible to the way he does them in Japanese, including the rhythm, the timing, the images… it was an almost literal translation… and the reaction was explosive! The audience are there to see a Japanese art form and if they feel that you are watering it down they will not like it very much.  

GP – Does Rakugo rely much on forms of wordplay, such as puns?  

KS – There are some stories based on wordplay and I simply don’t do them when I perform in English, it would be like beating your head against the wall and there is no need to do that, with so many stories to choose from. I just pick stories that don’t pose that kind of problem.  

GP – And what about local references? I notice that you explain a lot, you give much background information.  

KS – The interesting thing is that most of those explanations are the same that Japanese performers themselves give to their Japanese audience. A big part of the audience, indeed, probably have never seen Rakugo before, after all it is just one out of so many traditional Japanese art forms. When I ask the audience to raise a hand if they have seen Rakugo before, usually the result is that 80% of people haven’t, even in Japan. So, in the first half, while we are joking, we explain Rakugo, again even when performing in Japan and in Japanese. I think what is fascinating about this art form is that the explanation of the art form is part of the art form itself. You need to explain why people usually laugh, so the audience can feel comfortable about listening to the stories. So I’m doing nothing different here from what I do in Japan.

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149 This is an aspect that is probably “lost” in the translation to performances in English and outside Japan, for instance it was lost on me when I saw the show in Edinburgh. The reason for this is, arguably, that a performance of a traditional Japanese art form is perceived by a Western audience as intrinsically more difficult for them than for its Japanese audience, hence explanations tend to be perceived as required by the process of cultural mediation. The explanatory part of the Rakugo is, then, erroneously perceived as metatext, instead of being recognised as an integral part of the text. In this attitude a role might be played by an exoticising prejudice, according to which people from cultures commonly seen as traditional are implicitly thought as being almost automatically “at one” with their own traditions.
That to me seems to mark a sharp contrast with stand-up comedy in the West, which seems to be very much part of the audience’s experience.

I’m not sure, maybe here too you will find people who have spent 12 years or so without watching comedy live. And in stand-up comedy everybody has their own style; there are no strict rules, so there isn’t much that you need to explain. Rakugo, instead, has some very strict rules, I’m doing exactly the same as everybody else: we introduce ourselves, we give polite greetings to the audience, we joke about ourselves, we do a bit of observational humour, we introduce the theme of the story and, finally, we tell the story, which in turn has very specific rules, even regarding when to look left or right, and always end with a punch line. Within the frame of those rules you can develop your own style, but the rules themselves are very strict.

So, while in stand-up comedy there isn’t much to explain, in Rakugo, if you can manage to explain the procedure while making people laugh at the same time, then they will enjoy the show more.

So how to you differentiate yourself from other Rakugo performers? How do you make what you do “personal”? Or maybe you don’t feel that need?

I don’t specifically aim to be different from other people, actually I try to find who I really like as performers and I try to imitate them. There is no conscious effort to be individual. The first half, before the stories start, is different for every storyteller anyway, so that part is automatically personal. Regarding, instead, the performing of the stories, it is like when two different actors play the same part, they are going to make them their own naturally, without any need for a conscious effort to be different from the other performers.

Do you think that there is such a thing as a Japanese culturally-specific sense of humour?

Yes, I think there is but I don’t think it is really a part of Rakugo. I know that the sense of humour in Canada is different from that in the United States or in the UK, but the Rakugo sensibility is universal, it is a form of very simple and very light humour, about subjects such as

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Oshima (2011:52) explains that when the performer looks to the left he expresses a character in an upper position, while when he looks to the right he expresses a character in a lower position. Given the precise meaning conventionally associated with it, it is, then, not surprising that performers cannot change the direction of their looking without changing the “text” of the performance.

Novograd (1974:190) adds that the need to introduce the story is also a result of its being sometimes very old, with the consequence that its references, and sometimes even its language, might otherwise be lost on the audience. This relates to the idea, suggested in section 2.4, that, even from the monolingual perspective, performers of oral art forms represent what Steiner (1998:28-29) calls “translators of language out of time”.

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human relationships, for instance with your neighbours, which are reflected in the stories of
every culture. An example is my master’s story about the homework. This kid doesn’t
understand his homework so he asks his dad, who doesn’t understand it either so he asks his
colleague... it happens in any culture, you don’t need to explain it. Wherever I do that story, in
English or in Japanese, audiences always laugh at the very same moments and with the very
same intensity. This does not mean that Japanese or Canadian sense of humour are not
different, it just means that this specific art form borders on universality.152

GP – And what about the audience’s patterns of interaction? Do they change between Japan
and, say, Edinburgh?

KS – Every audience is different. The only general pattern of adaptation I follow is that if there
are some Japanese people in the audience, I deliver some jokes in Japanese before translating
them, so they can laugh first153.

GP – I guess you don’t have many hecklers in Japan, right?

KS – Yes, if they are drunk, but not that many. You don’t have many hecklers in stand-up
comedy here either, right?

GP – No, it’s much less common than people from outside the comedy world normally think.

KS – Maybe there is more in stand-up comedy, but there is so much formality and theatricality
involved in Rakugo that people generally refrain from heckling. Which is good, since responding
to hecklers is not a skill I’m particularly interested in developing.

GP – On this note, to me Rakugo looks like a very gentle form of comedy, which doesn’t involve
much aggressive humour. Do you agree?

Oshima (2011:51) also describes Rakugo as an instance of “universal humour” and offers an explanation: only
stories whose humour is not culturally-specific could have been survived through centuries of cultural changes
within Japan (although this observation is in partial contradiction with the other observation, reported above, that
in Rakugo explanations are often need in order to bridge the cultural gap between the old stories and their
contemporary audiences). This sort of natural selection has worked not only on the stories, but also on the themes
on which the stories are based. New stories, then, are created by developing these already historically well
selected themes and can, this way, partake of their character of universality. Oshima observes, indeed, that
“Rakugo humour works internationally when other modern Japanese comedy styles, based on present cultural and
social concepts, have difficulties” (Ibid.) It should also be noted that the universality of human nature seems to
constitute an explicit theme of Rakugo itself. For instance, James Black, an Englishman born in Australia who
became a celebrated Rakugo master in 19th century Japan, is quoted by Morioka & Sasaki (1983) as telling his
Japanese audience that “human feelings are universal and everybody has the same heart” (1983:161).

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became a celebrated Rakugo master in 19th century Japan, is quoted by Morioka & Sasaki (1983) as telling his
Japanese audience that “human feelings are universal and everybody has the same heart” (1983:161).

153 It might be interesting to note that I do exactly the same with some of my jokes about Italian expressions, when
Italian audiences are in the room.
KS – Yes, you are absolutely right. The main concern of the storyteller is never to divide the audience. It’s the whole point of the first half of the performance, which is called “makura”, meaning “pillow”. It’s called “pillow” because when I tell a story I want to take you into a dream world, so first I need to get you comfortable on your pillow. One of my seniors made a very interesting point when he said: “the point of makura is to make friends with the audience”\(^\text{154}\). I can see what kind of audience I have on that night, but I need all of them to like me, the 100% of them. If I deliver some edgy humour, for instance about religion or politics, there will be maybe a 1% or 2% of people who will think: “Oh, I don’t like that”. Before getting into a story you want to be sure that everybody is on board. Comedians of other forms might think, instead, that offending 10% of the people is acceptable if it makes the other 90% laugh harder.

GP – Indeed in the West many comedians try intentionally to split the audience.

KS – Yes, and then they try to “push it” and see where they can take it. But this is not what happens in our type of storytelling\(^\text{155}\), in which we are more concerned about complimenting the audience. So, it is indeed a very gentle form of humour. There is no swearing and no talking about sex, so you can bring your own family. When I performed in Toronto somebody told me: “I laughed for 90 minutes and there was not even a single moment when I regretted bringing my children”. And I’m happy of that because maybe in the English-speaking comedy world there is a niche for it, since it does not seem to happen that often.

GP – Japan is not always described as the most open and welcoming country towards foreigners. Did you find it difficult to be accepted as a Rakugo performer, as foreigner?

KS – Not at all. There is a faction of society that is very right-wing and wants to get rid of all foreigners, but it’s a very small faction. Actually, Japanese people are extremely interested in people from different countries and different cultures. In Canada, we have Quebec, which tried to gain independence a few times and always tries to preserve its French culture, with the

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\(^{154}\) Novograd (1974:190) notes that even during the storytelling section of the show, the Rakugo storyteller sometimes “will engage in impromptu repartee with his audience to establish some sort of contact, and to lessen the distance between the performer and the audience”, for instance by adding “I’ve never heard of anything so disgusting” (Ibid.) or “Now that’s what I call a real woman!” (Ibid.). This practice is very common in stand-up comedy, in which often it takes the form of the comedian’s commenting on his own jokes, maybe in order to release the tension cause by some “controversial” jokes or to minimise the potential embarrassment associated with a weak response.

\(^{155}\) This attention to never “split the audience” in Rakugo might be connected to the importance of “consensus” in Japanese culture. For instance, in Buckley (2001:88) “consensus” is defined as “a dominant mode of decision-making in Japan”.
consequence that everything that comes from the English world is seen as posing the danger of "watering down" the culture. In Japan, instead, people accept contributions from other cultures since they have faith that the traditional Japanese culture will never be watered down, that they can take any contribution and make their own thing of it.

GP – In that case, aren’t the audiences disappointed that you don’t bring them “Canadian” stand-up comedy?

KS – No, because I think they see my Rakugo as coming from a very Canadian perspective. For instance, I have a lot of material about how ridiculous Japanese grammar is from a Canadian’s prospective, about my mistakes with it. And this does not make me different from any other Rakugo storyteller, I’ll tell you why. Because, for instance, in Osaka everybody speaks the Osaka dialect and if a guy from, let’s say, Okinawa goes to Osaka, he needs to learn to speak the Osaka dialect and, of course, he will never learn it perfectly. So, he will probably develop material about growing up in Okinawa, moving to Osaka and dealing with people who make fun of the way he speaks. Every performer does material that is personal to them, so by doing material that is personal to me I will, inevitably, bring my being Canadian to the table. Actually, this is the part of my performance when people laugh the most. People keep asking me, either, if it is tough for me to be the only foreign Rakugo storyteller, or, if I have any advantages in being the only foreign Rakugo storyteller. And I reply “no” on both counts, or at least less than you would expect. When people didn’t know me and saw me walking on the stage with my

156 According to my own experience in both observing and performing stand-up comedy, this act of deriving humour from the native language of the majority of the audience seems to be almost constant for comedians whose native language is different from it. This practice usually follows two different patterns, which correspond to the two different types of “status” played by the comedian in relation to the audience: the “high status” humour of people who can see how “stupid” the audience’s native language is (for instance by stressing the irrationality of English phonetics) and the “low status” humour of the comedians who play with the cliché of the “funny foreigner” and make fun of their own mistakes in their attempts to learn the language. Apparently, this technique was also used in the 19th century by Henry Black, as Morioka & Sasaki (1983:157) report: “as all of his long narratives amply demonstrate, Black attained brilliant fluency in Japanese. The few detectable lapses do not hinder the flow of the narration, and in fact often produce a rather pleasing eccentric result, of which Black was fully aware and which he exploited for comic effect”. The paradox implicit in these words is that, in order to be able to play with the alleged “low status” embodied in these “lapses”, the foreign comedian needs to have obtained a “metalinguistic awareness” of the language that is often superior to that shared by the native members of the audience.

157 The case of Henry Black seems to have been different, since according to Morioka & Sasaki (1983:152) his foreignness was “an important factor in Black’s success as narrator and author”. It must be noted, however, that in his case the direction of the process of “cultural mediation” was inverted, since Black’s mission was that of bringing Western culture to Japan by means of Rakugo, to the point of creating, for instance, a Rakugo version of Dicken’s Oliver Twist (Morioka & Sasaki 1983:145).
dyed blond hair, they first thought: “ooohhh”. But that maybe lasted thirty seconds or a minute and after that minute I still have 50 minutes in which I could make people laugh.\textsuperscript{158}

GP – On that subject, why the dyed blond hair?

KS – It was my master’s idea. When he named me “Sunshine” he told me to dye my hair blond. The reason is that we were doing something that sometimes happen in Rakugo shows, which consists in getting six or seven performers on stage at the same time and you playing word games. It was part of my master’s show, which the master and five apprentices, including me, were touring at that time. My master is very famous, so we were performing in theatres of 2000 or 2500 capacity. There was a point when we were kneeling like this [he mimics bowing towards to audience to the effect that only the top of his head was visible to them], with the result that people far away could not see that I was a foreigner, so part of the impact was lost. In order to maximise the impact, then, my master asked me to dye my hair blond. That was when nobody knew that he had a foreigner apprentice, but after seven years, people who follow Rakugo know about me, so they are not surprised any longer.

GP – How did the name Katsura Sunshine come about?

KS – Again, it was chosen by my master. Katsura is my master’s family name and “sun” is part of his first name, so all 19 of us apprentices has received a name that consists in the ideogram from “sun” followed by something else, so we are all Katsura Sun-something.

\textsuperscript{158} Oshima (2011:61) offers a more problematic view, reporting that “those deeply involved with Rakugo did not believe that such an art peculiar to Japan could be understood by non-Japanese. Based on the concept of the concept of haji (disgrace), in their words, ‘If others do not understand it is better to keep silent’, they have put pressure on my activities of translating and performing Rakugo in English. This reaction, however, is mainly against translation as a form of cultural mediation (translated Rakugo is later compared, by the same people, to “Californian roles” as opposed to “proper sushi”), while what Katsura Sunshine is talking about here is his experience of performing Rakugo in Japanese. It should be noted, in this context, that Katsura Sunshine is the very image of the “immigrant” who has “gone native”, for example even off stage and outside he seems to wear only kimonos, as if in a constant attempt to reassure his audience about his commitment to the Japanese tradition. Interestingly, a very similar stance can be recognised in a surviving Rakugo script from Henry Black, quoted by Morioka & Sasaki (1983:161), in which this Englishman satires and laments 19\textsuperscript{th} century Japan’s fashion for all things Western, particularly with regards to clothes.
Swedish comedian Magnus Bertnér can be considered one of the most prominent figures in the emerging scene of bilingual stand-up comedy, having performed comedy in both Swedish and English for many years and at a highly professional level. The present interview was recorded in London on 6 May 2015.

GP – Did you start doing comedy in English or in Swedish?

MB – I started in Swedish, but then I started in English almost straight afterwards: I started coming to the UK, a week every year, to do open mic nights\(^{159}\), just to gain the feeling of a new scene. I then stopped, when I started getting more work back in Sweden. Finally, I came back in 2009, to do it more professionally.

GP – So you don’t feel any of those two languages to be “dominant”? Can you say the same thing about your writing?

MB – Actually, the writing process is very different, when I write in English or in Swedish. In Swedish, usually I don’t write things down, I just have ideas in my head and I go with them. In English, instead, I sit down at the computer and I write a script word-by-word, because it is more difficult for me to find the exact wording, if I leave it to the improvisation of the moment. That is probably also due to the fact that when I work in English I’m more nervous than when I work in Swedish, so I need the reassurance that comes with having everything written down.

GP – Did that change with time?

MB – Yes, I’m much more confident now than when I started, given that I have done two solo shows in English and written almost four hours of material.

GP – As opposed to how much in Swedish?

MP – Loads, I have done six 80 minute long specials\(^{160}\), plus other material not included in any of them, for a total of something around 15 hours.

GP – And how much do those bodies of material overlap?

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\(^{159}\) Nights in which everybody can perform, i.e. comedians do not need to be known to the promoter.

\(^{160}\) Solo shows performed live and recorded for television broadcasting.
The material I write here in England usually works in Sweden too, while most of the stuff I talk about in Sweden wouldn’t make any sense to people here. For instance, Swedish politics is of no interest to people here, while UK politics might be of some interest for a Swedish audience, provided, of course, that you limit yourself to the main figures and events. Apart from that qualification, I do have a lot of material that is the same in both languages.

GP – From what I read, in Sweden you are quite famous for your *ad personam* satirical attacks, which I guess you cannot transfer here, right?

MP – Yes, that’s right.

GP – Regarding, instead, the other direction of the transfer, to me people in Scandinavian countries seem particularly curious about what happens beyond their borders. Can you confirm this impression?

MB – Yes, and that starts from the language: we live in small countries so we have to learn English, while if you live in France or Germany you have many more people you can speak your native language with.

GP – Apart from the different level of confidence, do you feel any difference between performing in English and in Swedish? For instance, do you see any difference in your performance style?

MB – Maybe I tend to “act out” more when I perform in English, but that might also be due to the gap in my confidence with regard to the two languages. Apart from that, I don’t see any big difference. The main challenge is to keep an eye and on the references and to understand what are likely to “travel well”. Moreover, when you don’t live in a country your references will necessarily be pretty basic, for instance you don’t have the knowledge of who is on what TV show, who is in a relationship with whom and so on.

GP – That is because you are still based in Sweden, right?

MB – Yes, I just travel every now and then to do my shows and tours, but my base is in Sweden. When I want to try new material, though, I always come to London, since I find it the place where it is easier to be given the chance to try new things.

GP – And what can you say about the comedy scene in Sweden?
MB – It’s very good, it’s really big for such a small country and the quality is very good. I think I can say that, among all the countries I have been to, Sweden has the best scene, apart from the UK.

GP – What type of comedy is dominant there? Do you tend to have much character comedy, sketches or “impro”? 

MB – We have some comedy of that type, but most of it is the type most people would think about when they think about stand-up comedy\(^{161}\). It’s also broadening up, when the scene started it was mainly based on observational comedy, now you can also see surreal comedy, political comedy and so on.

GP – So, what was the “traditional” type of comedy in Sweden, before stand-up comedy replaced it when it was imported from the English-speaking world?

MB – I really don’t know, because stand-up comedy has been around for a long time, it started in 1989. That, I think, is one of the reasons why the quality of stand-up comedy in Sweden is so high, I mean it’s because it has been around for a longer than in most other European countries. I guess the tradition it replaced was based on variety shows and sketch groups, but I really don’t know.

GP – Can you say that the Swedish scene is very TV-dominated?

MB – Not as much as it used to be, there are not many panel shows anymore. Comedians who enter a TV career usually tend to end up behind the cameras, mainly as writers. It is not like in New York, where the entire comedy scene seems to be aimed to appear on TV. In Sweden the live scene is healthy and you can make a good living out of doing live shows only.

GP – I noticed that you don’t do much wordplay, is that right?

MB – Yes, I don’t even do it in Swedish and, even if I were interested in that sort of comedy, doing wordplay in English would be too hard for me, I wouldn’t enjoy it.

GP – On the other hand, your type of comedy is very confrontational. Does this meant that when you travel you have to deal with different sensitivities? In one of your shows you talk, for

\(^{161}\) By using that expression, Magnus cleverly avoided the problem of defining stand-up comedy (see for instance section 5.9 for a discussion of how problematic that definition can be, with particular reference to the transfer between the English-speaking-word and Italy).
instance, about clashing against the religious sensitivity of the audience in the USA or with the
blasphemy law in Ireland. I have the impression that, more than to the language, the challenges
you face seem due to cultural differences. Can you confirm this impression?

MB – For sure, and even more because, like it was the case in New York, I don’t want to adapt
to other cultures. I think the comedy scene there has been destroyed by all the comics who do
stand-up only to get on TV, so the audience are used to something safe, to not being
challenged: you can’t be edgy in any way, you can’t do “dirty” material, you can’t do political
material and so on. I guess that you went to a comedy club in Manhattan twenty-five years ago,
you would have found it much edgier that it is today, because people back then did live
comedy in order to do comedy and the audience was made of people who read books, went to
the theatre, were interested in the news and so on, while nowadays they are mainly tourists,
who have seen comedy on TV and they expect the very same thing.

GP – I find it interesting that you are marking such a big distance from the American scene,
since the comedian you most closely remind me of is Doug Stanhope.

MB – Well, he had a great influence on me, I think he’s still the best around and if what I do
reminds people of him, I’m only happy about that.

GP – The good news for you is that you sound much more optimistic than Stanhope seems to
be nowadays. Back to the British scene, what kind of shows do you do when you come here?

MB – Mostly comedy clubs, but I’ve also done the Soho Theatre, the Leicester Square Theatre
and two runs of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

GP – What’s your opinion of the Edinburgh Fringe?

MB – It’s a great experience, it’s very inspirational... for a couple of days. Then it becomes too
tiring, you feel exhausted after the first week and you realise that you still have two weeks.

GP – Even with an agency or a PR company behind you? Imagine how it is for the rest of us,
MB – Yeah, I actually always had very good press coverage, before and during it, but I found the experience exhausting nevertheless. This year I don’t have a strong new hour so I am skipping this round, I’ll probably do it next year.

GP – Back to the subject of language, you have a joke about the fact that the Swedish language has a word for “having sex with a dismembered body”, while the English language doesn’t. Do you think that language differences can reveal cultural differences?

MB – I have never really thought of that, but I must admit that the English and the Swedish languages, which are the only ones I know well, are very similar, they share many roots and they borrow many words from each other, so maybe I’m not in the best position to experience and appreciate deep cultural differences reflected in language.

GP – Did you perform anywhere else in Europe in English, apart from Sweden and the UK?

MB – Yes, I performed in Slovenia, Croatia, the Netherlands, plus all the other Scandinavian countries, although in Denmark most people understand Swedish, but I wouldn’t be able to understand their Danish.

GP – Or maybe they would not like you performing to them in Swedish, right?

MB – No, probably not. I like to travel as much as I can, I like to experience different comedy scenes, particularly those that are still very new.

GP – How do you find those scenes? More demanding or more forgiving than the more established ones?

MB – Probably more forgiving, but the problem is that they have never been exposed to my type of comedy, which, as you noticed, is very confrontational. When stand-up comedy starts out in a country, usually it does not start out with my style of comedy, it usually starts with observational comedy.

GP – I noticed that it’s a type of comedy that sometimes produces applause even more than laughter. Don’t you ever fear, when that happens, that you are “preaching to the converted”? 

\[162\] 2015.
MB – Yes, and that’s exactly why I like to travel and to face new audiences. In Sweden most people know what to expect from me, while abroad most people do not and can be surprised, or even shocked, by it. I travel to challenge myself.

GP – Who did your form your taste on, growing up? Who were your main references?

MB – Mainly Bill Hicks and Eddie Izzard. Before the internet, it wasn’t easy to put your hands on English-speaking comedy and the only videos we had in Sweden were Eddie Izzard’s.

GP – With subtitles?

MB – No, there was no need for them in Sweden, those videos were just imported as they were. Later I watched Eddie Murphy’s “Delirious”, probably ten years before starting to perform.

GP – Do your Swedish colleagues also perform in English?

MB – There are a few, who mainly followed me, in the sense I started doing it and it went pretty well so other comedians wanted to try the same.

GP – Yes, you were indeed a bit of a pioneer. And you seem a great believer in the universality of comedy. Is that correct?

MB – Yes, I find it very good that more and more people are now doing comedy across countries, cultures and languages. I think it can bring us together, it can remind us of what we have in common. Moreover, without sounding too pretentious, I think that comedy can have a healing power. Some people think, for instance, that I like to take sensitive issues and make fun of them, despite the pain these issues cause to people, but it’s actually the other way round: I start from something that causes pain to me, knowing that the same is probably happening to other people too, and I make fun of it in order to help myself. Hopefully, by doing so, I help other people too. I think that comedy is a great way of coping with all the horrible things that life throws our way.
Rome-based Francesco De Carlo is the most established comedian to have performed both in Italian and in English. As discussed below, he is one of the founders of the Satiriasi comedy club (in Italian) and Rome Comedy Club (in English), he brought his comedy to the Italian television and he is part of the international collective Comedians sans Frontieres, founded by Eddie Izzard. The present interview was recorded in London on 29 July 2015.

GP – How, where and why did you start comedy?

FD – In a sense, I’ve always had that idea. I’m the kind of person who has always liked to crack a joke, socially. In 2008-2009, I discovered ComedySubs, a fan subs website that I think was at the origin of the interest for stand-up comedy in Italy. When I saw the classic of American and British stand-up comedy, particularly George Carlin, but also Bill Hicks, Chris Rock, Eddie Izzard and so on, I discovered that there was a type of comedy that was different from the type that was on the Italian TV, which never interested me, neither as a comedian nor as an audience member. It’s from that discovery that Satiriasi was born. We gave ourselves a manifesto, the subtitle of which was: “La risata non è il fine, ma il mezzo” [“Laughter is not the goal, but the means”]. So, we wanted to bring a point of view to the stage, avoiding cheap jokes, we wanted to share personal experience, stories from our own life.

GP – Can you explain what Satiriasi is?

FD – It has been a sort of lab, created by Filippo Giardina, who would hate me calling it a “lab”. We did a comedy night every two weeks, ten a year, for five or six years. It was on a Monday, so on the Monday on which we didn’t have the show we did rehearsals, we compared our notes.

GP – Do you mean rehearsals without an audience?

FD – Yes, they weren’t proper rehearsals on the stage, more a comparison between our texts [“testi” in the original, it might also refer to notes or scripts]. I think that Satiriasi, against all expectations, managed to create a type of comedy that is very different from what is traditional in Italy. The other key rule we gave ourselves was to perform new material every time, every two weeks. This helped us to develop our writing and to have regular audience
members, who came every night. So the audience got bigger and bigger and we ended up on
TV.

GP – I find your description of American stand-up comedy in opposition to the Italian comedy
scene very interesting. I was recently discussing this with Antonello Taurino, who has a very
strong opinion on this. In his view, and I tend to agree with him, there has been in Italy what he
calls “misunder-stand-up comedy”, a misunderstanding of the notion of stand-up comedy. For
various reasons, because you discovered George Carlin and Bill Hicks before everyone else in
the canon, and because you needed something to propose as an alternative to the mainstream,
in Italy comedians identified the Anglo-American comedy tradition in general, and stand-up
comedy in particular, with politically engaged comedy. As you know, that is a bit of a
simplification: you can find all sort of comedy within stand-up comedy.

FD – I totally agree. It is true that Bill Hicks, George Carlin, Chris Rock, nowadays Louis C.K.,
have brought stand-up comedy to a very high level of development. I’ve now been five times to
the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and I’ve come to London many times, so I know that the scene is
very broad and diverse. That said, even here [in the UK] it is that type of comedy [we took as
our reference] that is considered the “strongest” type of stand-up comedy. I’m not saying that
they didn’t have a more “popular” stream of stand-up comedy here.

GP – Sure, but I don’t think the distinction is always a distinction of quality. Take, for instance,
Steven Wright: he does one-liners, he uses wordplay, he is not interested in political satire, but
I find what he does sublime, qualitatively speaking.

FD – That’s for sure. However, you can’t find the equivalent of Steven Wright in the Italian
comedy scene. Even if there was one, he would have never appeared on TV.

GP – Sure, but my point was that you can’t identify quality with satire, with a content-oriented
comedy, with political engagement: you can also have sublime wordplay, or sublime nonsense.

FD – I agree with you, I was always the most open-minded in the Satiriasi group.

GP – The manifesto written by Filippo Giardina for it, however, is very strong on these points,
given that, for instance, it forbids wordplay.

FD – Yes, but it was a good thing that it existed. We needed it. To use your example, wordplay
can be the easiest option. You can do clever wordplay, but doing silly wordplay is the easiest
option. We needed that inhibition. Before my involvement with Satiriasi, my material included several instances of wordplay. I know have a couple, even in my English set.

GP – Was the English wordplay written specifically for the English set?

FD – No, it is wordplay that works in both languages. So, I do use wordplay, but I am conscious that it represents a very banal technique.

GP – Can you give me any examples?

FD – Yes, one of the first I wrote is about the previous Pope [Benedict XVI] and the fact that he was obsessed with sex. It went this way: “Il Papa è ossessionato dal sesso: scriverà un libro sulla storia dell’universo intitolato “Dal Big Bang al Gang Bang” [“The Pope is obsessed with sex: he will write a book on the history of the universe entitled “From Big Bang to Gang Bang”].

GP – I see. So it worked in English because the original Italian was already based on English words, right?

FD – Yes, it is one of the few wordplay jokes I translated, but I am not doing it any longer. It is true that you can do very clever wordplay, but if you avoid it all together you force yourself to look for more articulated techniques. So, I am happy that Satiriasi had a manifesto that forced us to get better.

GP – You mentioned doing comedy in English. How long after having started in Italian did you start in English?

FD – I started in Italian during the summer 2009. During the summer 2010 I came to London, I met Giada Garofalo and I started to perform at “open mic” nights. I translated into English three five minute sets and I tried them out here in London.

GP – How did you choose what material to translate?

FD – Given that my English wasn’t that strong and that I didn’t have any experience of performing in English, I decided to translate my oldest and most tested material. The end result of this experience was my run at the Edinburgh Fringe 2014, during which my show changed a lot, since I started to feel confident enough to start translating the latest material I had developed in Italian. My second show in English will be completely different.

GP – Did you also develop new material in English, which you then translated into Italian?
FD – Yes, that happened, although at the moment I can’t recall any example. At the moment, I have two long shows developed in Italian and one in English. Now I want to develop my third Italian show and make it my second in English: I aim at sharing 90% of material between the two.

GP – Does it mean that, in order to do so, you will write it with the two languages in mind?

FD – Yes.

GP – And what about your writing technique?

FD – It is difficult for me to answer this question, sometime material comes to my mind already formed, so I can’t remember its genesis.

GP – Don’t you do any “on stage” editing?

FD – That is the big problem of the Italian comedy scene: we don’t have enough stage time, and we have stage time in front of an audience not very familiar with stand-up comedy, so we don’t have enough opportunities to develop material on the stage, which is indeed how material should really be developed.

GP – This reminds me of the first gig I played in Italy, quite recently. I noticed that all the other comedians were very “scripted”, they didn’t address what was happening, such as late comers and so on.

FD – That depends on the level of experience of the single comedians. In our group, we have some very experienced comedians who are very good at addressing whatever is happening at the moment.

GP – Apart from the origin of the material, what about the writing technique itself? Do you write things down on paper, word-by-word?

FD – Yes, I do. One of the reasons is that we ended up on TV and TV people always want to see a script in advance. I could, however, do without it, but I would need more stage time.

GP – With regard to your Edinburgh Fringe 2014 show: did you start with translating the written Italian script?

FD – Yes.
GP – Did you have opportunities to try it out in English before the Fringe?

FD – Very limited: five or six ten minute sets in London, a couple of show previews in Rome in front of expats, plus the Rome Comedy Club, which is a monthly comedy night in English we have been running for five years now.

GP – What level of difficulty did you experience in this translation activity?

FD – If I can say so: minimal. Particularly if you consider my poor English. Everybody keeps telling me: how can you translate your jokes into English? For me it looks like the least of all difficulties. Here you have an audience that is so prepared about comedy that translation becomes a detail. Of course, not everything can be translated, you need to adapt the references and so on, but if you based your material on ideas and viewpoints, then the material works in a very similar way in the two languages. If you are talking about being cheated by your partner, for instance, that is something that happens everywhere: you just need to focus on what you are saying, more than on how to say it. Ok, with the exception of trying to avoid mistakes: recently I kept doing a joke in Rome in English and nobody was laughing, then I realised that I was mispronouncing a word.

GP – You mentioned the difference in the attitude from the audience. More in general, what do you think are the main differences between the comedy scenes in Italy and in Britain?

FD – What I understood, also from conversations with other comedians, is that in Britain at the start of the 80s, at the same time as the emergence of the Punk movement, so late ’70s-early 80s, there was a transformation with regard to comedy, with the emergence of the Alternative Comedy scene. Before that, comedy here was also much based on characters and on stereotypes, and there was also a strong sketch comedy tradition. In Italy, instead, a different type of comedy has remained dominant, for instance regional comedy: one of the major TV comedy shows at the moment is entitled Made in Sud [English-Italian portmanteau meaning “Made in the South”]. Social stereotypes also play a big role. There are some themes that keep recurring: how difficult it is to go to a wedding during the summer; how difficult Rome’s traffic is; how hard-working the Milanese are in comparison to the Neapolitans; how long the queue always is at the post office.... There are some topics to which comedy does not add anything, you are just getting a laugh out of something the audience already know. Not to mention the importance of characters. Even if we recognise the great Commedia dell’arte tradition, the
great tradition of impersonators (for instance, the Guzzanti [brother and sister], who are excellent satirists), all this has become very hackneyed.

GP – What do you think is the problem with playing a character?

FD – It’s a completely different way of doing comedy. I prefer doing monologues [as myself].

GP – Do you think it’s because you are expressing your own point of view? That there is more accountability, so to speak?

FD – Exactly.

GP – You mentioned the difference in the audiences’ attitude. Antonello Taurino also told me that here he experiences a level of respect from the audience that he doesn’t feel in Italy.

FD – For sure, I completely agree with Taurino on this. I think what makes a difference is the concept of “comedy club”. A comedy club is a place where you come in, buy a beer, sit down and listen to people talking to make you laugh. In Italy, you have to perform in places such as restaurants.

GP – Do you mean with people who are not there for the comedy?

FD – Indeed, there are people who are not there for you, and I don’t mean for you as Francesco De Carlo, but for somebody who is performing comedy, also because there is no entrance ticket. Comedy clubs are only starting to emerge now: Oppio Caffè, Satiriasi...

GP - Yes, I recently played John Peter Sloan’s comedy club in Milan and it was a proper comedy club, ticket included.

FD – Sure, but it has been running only for a year or so. In the past, there were very few of them and they were always dependent on TV.

GP – Interesting point: what role do you think TV plays in Italy? Do you think it’s still dominant?

FD – Yes, due to the lacking of a real live circuit. To give you an example, yesterday here in London I performed with Harry Hill, who has decades of experience and is a TV celebrity. He was there with me, although I am new to the British scene: the comedians themselves have a respect for the live scene that we in Italy don’t have. Maybe in Italy TV comedians might do arena shows, but we are missing a live scene in the middle.
GP – I find it interesting that here in Britain the most important comedy TV programs are recorded live shows, such as *Live at the Apollo*. In Italy sometime I have the impression that the opposite happens, i.e. that live shows are just TV shows performed live, so to speak.

FD – I agree, and I can confirm it with a personal experience. My first TV show was *Un, due, tre, stella* with Sabina Guzzanti. I will always be grateful to her, but as a TV experience for me it was traumatic. It was my first TV experience so I wasn’t in the position to make my point heard, but I think what you are saying is correct, it wasn’t a live show recorded for TV, but a TV show with a live audience. For instance, I was asked to look at the camera, instead than at the audience in the room, and there wasn’t only one camera, but three, one of which was moving, so you had to look for what camera had the red light on and move your attention to it, otherwise, they said, you are not really involving the audience at home. The live audience, instead, were very far from me, around ten meters. This demonstrates how we didn’t have a stand-up comedy culture in Italy yet. Moreover, my comedy set followed one hour of earnest political debate. In Italy, comedians are more often asked to perform during serious talk shows that during programmes dedicated to comedy. This, again, gives you the idea of how unprepared for stand-up comedy we are. I don’t mean with regard to its content, but with regard to its form: we don’t know how to bring it to TV, there is no real live circuit and so on. I don’t think that the difference between [traditional Italian] cabaret and stand-up comedy is only in the content; it is also in the form. Although, I must admit that on the content side as well, we never had in Italy quality content like that of Louis C.K.

GP – Maybe in the case of Daniele Luttazzi, given that he was stealing it from all the greatest.

FD – Even in that case, apart from the texts, when I saw the documentary in which his material is compared with the material he stole, what impressed me is that on one side you had comedians who were really “acting” (I mean, not as in not proper acting, but you could see that they have prepared their performance), while Luttazzi was reading from a script on a stand! Even in that case, then, we really didn’t make the transfer properly. Moreover, if George Carlin wrote something it was because he really felt it, but if you steal material, you can’t really make it yours. Another thing that impressed me in Luttazzi’s case is the quantity of the material that was stolen. All comedians are sons of their tradition, that is sure, it might also happen, for instance, that Robin Williams and Steve Rock might have a similar joke, but the scale was completely different. He translated entire long routines, not only single jokes.
GP – The other problem, I think, was the arrogant way in which he tried to defend himself.

FD – And it’s a real pity, I was a fan, when I first heard about what he did I couldn’t believe it, when I saw the evidence I was very disappointed, because he was an important role model for all of us.

GP – Can you tell me something about your experience with Eddie Izzard’s *Comedy sans Frontieres*?

FD – Yes, I met Eddie Izzard in 2013, after one of his shows, I then met his manager and I was asked to do some gigs in London in December. They went very well, so I was offered to do an Edinburgh Fringe show in the summer of that same year. From there, the idea of *Comedy sans Frontieres* was born: beside me, the group includes: Michael Mittermeier, who is German; Yacine Belhousse, who is French; Igor Meerson, who is Russian; plus, of course, Eddie Izzard who is English. We did eight nights together, the latest in Berlin and Moscow.

GP – I must confess that I find this project contradictory. I mean, the starting point seems to be the idea that comedy is universal, but then comedians are “collected”, so to speak, on the basis of their nationality, and presented to the audience as such. Don’t you think that stressing so much the importance of nationality can hinder the universalistic message?

FD – I think this is a problem of the comedy scene in general. There is a lot of ghettoisation and not only with regard to nationality: women always talk about women, black comedians always talk about being black, gay comedians about being gay and so on. Moreover, the audience want to hear something from the point of view of somebody who comes from somewhere else. If this becomes playing on the stereotypes, I agree with you that it might be dangerous, Initially I was a bit concerned about that myself. But, at the end, the personal comedy styles also play an important part: there is the point of view from the perspective of where you come from, but there is much else too. Finally, it is also important to break physical frontiers, to allow comedians to perform internationally.

GP – This, I guess, poses some challenges to the comedians, who usually tailor-make their material to a specific audience and situation. How do you deal with that, if one night you perform in Berlin and the next in Moscow?
FD – Well, first of all, in both cases we perform in front of an international audience. Secondly, it’s here that the Eddie Izzard’s idea behind this project, that humour is simply human, finds its vindication.

GP – For instance, who were your audience in Moscow?

FD – Mostly Russian, although of course with an international outlook.

GP – Not American or British expats, then?

FD – Very few, mostly young Russians.

GP – So, between Berlin and Moscow, you did the same set.

FD – Yes, mostly. I didn’t feel the need to do otherwise, because I have been doing this show in Switzerland, Estonia, Latvia, Finland... I know that it works everywhere. This I think is the revolutionary aspect of Comedy sans Frontieres: the demonstration that, going beyond frontiers and beside cultural references, you can make everybody laugh.

GP – I read an article from Eddie Izzard about the universality of humour. I found it a bit simplistic, as I tried to explain on [comedy online magazine] Chortle. My impression is that his judgement is influenced by the type of humour he prefers, which is absurdist humour: he plays with subverting the rules of logic, which indeed are considered universal. Do you agree?

FD – We should also remember that the audience who come to see Izzard or Comedy sans Frontieres are very intelligent and well prepared, they are people who are there because they want to experience something that is a bit different from what their national comedy scene usually offers.

GP – Changing subject, how was your Edinburgh Fringe experience? I remember you expressing the fear of having been too cautious in your choice of material.

FD – Well, given that happened afterward, I must now say that it was probably the right strategy. First of all, I had to recognise my weaknesses with regard to the English language. This makes me insecure on the stage. Sometimes I want to ad-lib something, but I can’t find the

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163 Izzard’s article can be found at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/feb/05/eddie-izzard-force-majeure-tour-paris.

164 My comments to Izzard’s article can be found at: http://www.chortle.co.uk/correspondents/2015/02/09/21811/international_comedy_is_harder_than_eddie_izzard_says.
words. I’m getting better, but I wasn’t really ready at that Edinburgh Fringe. This influenced my choice of material: I chose my most accessible material. I chose to focus on my most punch line-based material, for which the setup is very short.

GP – Do you have different plans for your next Edinburgh Fringe, then?

FD – Yes, I want to make it more narrative, to tell stories, to which the punch line will offer closure. It is where my current development in Italian has brought me, so in the past there was a misalignment in development between the De Carlo in Italian and the De Carlo in English, in the sense that in English I had to do a type of comedy that I had already overgrown in Italian. Now that I have more experience and I feel more confident in English, my aim is to realign the two. The same applies to the content: my English show contained references to Berlusconi, which I stopped doing in Italian ages ago. When you go to a country where nobody knows you, to perform in a language you don’t feel so confident about, you need to find the easiest point of contact between you and your audience. My next show in English will be more personal. I will still speak of me being Italian, which is something I can’t leave unsaid, given that indeed I am Italian. Said that, I also think that there are topics that are universal. For instance, corruption is a universal issue, not just an Italian one. The same applies to religion, which is a universal theme, but also a theme on which the point of view of somebody who lives in the same country as the Pope can offer added value, so to speak. My being Italian means having a specific point of view on a universal topic.

GP – In order to move to this new level, do you think you will need more stage time in English?

FD – Yes, that is why I am here [in London] now. One more advantage of the British scene over the Italian one is that here you can find comedy nights dedicated to developing new material, where maybe you can find very well established comedians who perform in front of a small audience. This is unthinkable in Italy, where established comedians would consider doing something like that as putting their reputation in danger. It’s all very risk-adverse. Well, at least that puts me in a position of advantage.

GP – Do you “feel” differently when you perform in English than when you perform in Italian?

FD – Yes, in English I have more fun.

GP – That’s very interesting, why do you think it’s so?
FD – I like the absurdity of the situation. Moreover, I like performing in front of an audience who is there for comedy, which is something that is only now starting to happen in Italy. Besides, the absurdity or the cynicism of some of my jokes is more in line with the taste of the audience here [in the UK]. In Italy the audience seem to have a pre-formed idea of what is funny and do not seem much interested in exploring anything else. Here, instead, I saw comedians do all sort of crazy things.

GP – This reminds me of what Romina Puma told me about the difficulty of doing comedy about disability in Italy.

FD – Of course. So, now I know that here I can take more risks, but I had to play safe with my first show in English. I must also admit, however, that although most of the reviews I received in Edinburgh were positive, some reviewers in my opinion sometimes seemed to betray a form of distrust, I mean from the representatives of the culture that developed this type of comedy towards somebody who comes from the outside. Not everybody has that distrust, though. Moreover, I find it very understandable. If there was a Polish comedian doing comedy in Italian in Italy, what role do you think he would be allowed to play, if not that of the macchietta [stereotypically funny character, in this context: funny foreigner]?

GP – That is interesting. However, the British comedy scene is full of non-British comedians.

FD – Sure, but that is part of the difference between the much more developed British scene and the Italian one. In Italy, a foreign comedy could only play a very limited role. So, maybe I brought this lack of confidence [regarding being accepted as a foreign comedian] within me, on top of my lack of confidence with regard to the language.

GP – More generally speaking, how did you find the Edinburgh Fringe experience? It was very useful, also for my career in Italy, given that I never had the change to perform a one hour show for 26 consecutive days before. I think it made me develop a lot as a performer in Italian too. A very tough experience, but very formative, which I can’t wait to repeat. I hope to be the first Italy-based comedian, who built his career in Italy (I mean, unlike you comedians of the London Puma, who are London-based), who also performs internationally. I think in the future it will be normal, so I hope that my experience, including my mistakes, will be useful for those who will come after me. It’s part of a more general development, mostly due to the
internet. Even our experience of *Satiriasi* was expired by what we could discover on the internet, particularly via the *ComedySubs* fan subs community. Now TV series are also more watched internationally, think for instance of *Breaking Bad* or *Black Mirror*. Most of the things we like the most come from outside Italy. So, we need to open both channels: we need to bring our experience abroad and we need to be open to influences from abroad. I think all Italian comedians, for instance, should go to the Edinburgh Fringe, even without bringing a show there. If you really have in interest in comedy, you should be ready to take at least one week out of your seaside holidays in August and go to Edinburgh instead, and watch all kind of shows, not only stand-up comedy, but sketch comedy, improvised shows... when I discovered improvised musicals for me it was a mind blowing discovery! You shouldn’t be too scared of the language. So, I hope that after my experience, more and more [Italian comedians] will be open to the rest of the world. Why wouldn’t you choose to talk to sixty million people when you can talk to seven billion?

GP – I think that will work well as a closing to the interview. Thank you very much.
Katerina Vrana is a Greek comedian who performs regularly both in English and in Greek. The present interview was collected in Edinburgh on 30 August 2016.

GP – Did you start doing comedy in Greece?

KV – No, in the UK.

GP – What made you start?

KV – I studied acting, then by living in London I ended up doing more and more comedy-related things, such as comedy improvisation, which I discovered I really liked, then I moved to sketch writing, and from there moving to stand-up comedy was quite natural.

GP – How long do you do stand-up comedy in the UK for?

KV – From 2009 to 2014.

GP – Then you moved to Greece?

KV – It wasn’t planned. I did a show in Australia, then I brought it to Greece and it took off, hugely, which I wasn’t expecting, I thought I had more chances in Australia. My plan was to keep travelling, after Australia and Greece I was planning to go to India, Singapore, the United States, but Greece took off. I wasn’t expecting that at all, because they are very conservative, they don’t know about stand-up, they don’t have a history of that kind of comedy. Greece is more oriented towards very political satire. Comedy is either very base, about flatulence, burping, fat people etc. or it’s political satire. Stand-up, instead, is more thematic and more personal. Moreover, there are a lot of taboos around depression, mental issues, those things are not discussed as much. But what I was hoping for is that the economic crisis would loosen up all those things, that you would become allowed to be depressed, because of the crisis. Indeed, the crisis made depression look justified, so now it is not as much a taboo as was before.

GP – Did you bring your show *Feta with the Queen* to Greece?
KV – Well, first I started with some forays into Greece, every time I went there to visit family etc. I did something there. In 2012 I stayed in Greece for six weeks and I started doing open mic nights along with another comedian, then in 2013 I did *Feta with the Queen* there in English, since I wanted to be sure that it had a general appeal, that it wasn’t only for the UK audience, so I decided to do it in Greece for the expats, then I took it to Australia, for both the Greeks and the Aussies there, then I took it to Edinburgh and at that point it was super-polished.

GP – Did you change the point of view of the show, according to the different languages and audiences?

KV – No, because it’s written from my point of view. That is exactly what I wanted: to be sure that my point of view could come across regarding of whom I was talking to. After *Feta* I wanted to do more travelling, so in 2014 I started the travelling, but then Greece took off and suddenly I was based there. At first I was staying with my parents, but I kept staying longer and longer and, you know, there is an age when you can’t live with your parents, so I started renting a tiny flat, where I don’t live most of the time because even in Greece I travel a lot.

Also, I go to the Australian festivals for a couple of months per year. The comedy festivals are great there, the weather is great and there is a huge population of Greeks: the biggest population of Greeks outside Greece is in Melbourne. What I’ve been trying to do, but failed so far, is on the way to Australia to stop in India, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, but it has always been such a rush, because Greeks don’t plan ahead, so plans change all the time. My new show is called *Let’s talk about sex*, I was supposed to do it only until Christmas, but it has now become the most successful comedy show of all times in Greece, it played three times a week for a 140 seater from October 2015 to April 2016 and we added extra shows at Christmas… it was mental!

GP – Were both shows developed both in Greece and in Greek?

KV – No, *Feta with the Queen* was developed as a show in English, even if the basis for it was in Greek165. So, as a show it was first performed in English, then I translated and adapted it to Greek. When I started to perform it a lot in Greek, I started changing it [in that language].

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165 Solo shows are often developed by connecting single routines, which were originally developed as separate routines and tried out as short sets as comedy clubs. Here Vrana is saying that the original routines were developed in Greek, but they were connected together and developed as a show in English.
GP – You mentioned “translation”. Do you find that your English and Greek shows much overlap in terms of material?

KV – Yes, of course, they are more or less the same.

GP – What kind of adaptations did you have to make? Maybe cultural references?

KV – No, with *Feta with the Queen* I didn’t have to change many references, the only difference is that when I perform it in Greek I don’t have to explain the Greek [culture-related] part of it, while I have to explain the British part of it. For instance, there is a bit about British water taps, which in the UK gets a round of applause from all the international members of the audience... from everyone but the Brits, who pretend not to understand what is strange with them. With regard to *Let’s talk about sex*, some parts in the UK are not shocking and hence not funny, while in Greece they are shocking and so they are funny. Also, a woman talking about these things has a stronger shock factor in Greece. My ideal audiences are probably the Australians, since in front of them I usually perform in English with Greek words thrown in and they get them straight away.

GP – On a similar subject, do you do much wordplay in your comedy?

KV – I’m very bad at it, in both languages. I only do bilingual puns, which of course only work for audiences who know both languages.

GP – I guess not having monolingual puns is good for you, since they are notoriously difficult to translate.

KV – Yes, they are impossible to translate.

GP – What can you tell me about your writing process?

KV – I don’t write.

GP – Not even bullet points?

KV – No, I keep everything in my mind. Actually, I also use recordings: every solo show I have done, it’s recorded. So, if I haven’t performed a specific show for a while, I have to sit through an hour and a half of myself. At that stage, I might write something down as a reminder, but I cannot do it while I am still developing the material, because otherwise it becomes too mechanical. I like to be able to move things around. I only bring to the stage a list of bullet
points (so, I don’t use them when I’m writing new material, but I do use them later on). Not
only they are a safety net, but I can also use them to remember the sequence of a show
without having to listen to all of it again.

GP – Going back to the translation process, did you face many difficulties with it?

KV – I faced many difficulties not with the translation, but with the performance. That’s
because I can speak and write in Greek, but until recently I had never performed stand-up in
Greek. English has a complete different rhythm. In English, sentences are shorter, so it is easier
to be funnier, because punch lines hit faster and harder. Greek is less “punchy”, so the laughter
needs to come from somewhere else. It took ages for me to be able to do that, at first I felt
restricted. I had been living in the UK, after my university years, for twelve years, with very little
contact with Greek speaking people. Even with my Greek friends, I usually saw them in mixed
company, so we spoke English. I had forgotten nouns, verbs, tenses. I had to write things down.

GP – Interesting, so you were not writing things down when developing your material in
English, but you started doing it when you started performing in Greek, right?

KV – No, actually at that stage of my development as a comedian (I had been doing stand-up
for only two years) I was still writing things down in both languages.

GP – So, when you developed as a comedian, you stopped writing in either language?

KV – Yes, that is correct. Even now, by the way, if I don’t perform in Greek for a long time, it
takes a while for me to get into it. Moreover, in Greece solo shows are an hour and a half long,
so they require longer preparation.

GP – You are also a very physical performer. Did your body language change in the passage?

KV – Yes, I use hand gestures much more when I perform in Greek, it’s just the way people talk
there, like it is for you Italians.

GP – So that happens regardless of the location, right? I mean, even if you are performing in
Greek in Australia, for instance.

KV – Yes, it is associated with the language, not with the location of performance.

GP – Changing topic, how do you see the difference between the British and the Greek comedy
scene?
There is no Greek comedy scene, or at least there wasn’t, until very recently. In Greece, they don’t know what stand-up is, it’s not an established medium of expression.

KV – What’s traditional comedy there, then?

KV – Either political satire or very basic comedy, in which comedians mock fat people, gay people, ethnic minorities and so on, although there has been much improvement, starting from the 50s and the 60s. In the 90s there was an explosion of good sit-coms, but then it went downhill again. In 1995, some people came back from the United States and started doing stand-up for the first time, stealing material from Bill Hicks and George Carlin.

GP – Without crediting them?

KV – Yes, without crediting them, because nobody knew them in Greece anyway.

GP – This is very interesting, since exactly the same thing happened in Italy.

KV – I think the same thing happened in every country where stand-up was imported, it’s how it started. Then, of course, internet access became more available, so people could watch more stand-up online, particularly American. With the financial crisis, people wanted cheap entertainment, so suddenly all these things came together to create a perfect storm, so to speak, for the emergence of a stand-up comedy scene. I think at the moment we are around forty comedians, in the all of Greece. Making a living out of it, I think there is eleven of us. I’m seen as a bit of an oddity, both as a woman and as someone who also has a career in the UK. A headline on a newspaper was: “The Greek woman who makes the serious British people laugh”. They asked me: “How do you do that? The British don’t have a sense of humour”.

GP – That’s the opposite of how the British see themselves!

Anyway, now there is only one comedy club in Athens and one in Thessaloniki, only one night a week. That’s apart from solo shows, which are in theatres. Stand-up comedy club nights, instead, are in cafes and bars, which pay the comedians, as close to 0 euros as they can, with people getting in for free, so it’s just a way to entice people in.

GP – Does that mean that there will also be people in the venue who are not there for the comedy?

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166 If this is true, that means that stand-up is started in every country (to which is not native) via an act of allographic covert translation.
Indeed, moreover those people will probably consider comedy as the equivalent of background music, as something they can chat with their friends over, so you have to explain to them that this is not the case. I also have to explain what the role of the MC is, because when I first arrived in Greece, the MC was doing half an hour at the top, then he brought somebody to do ten minutes, then he did another half an hour, then he called another act to do ten minutes, after which he did another twenty minutes set. That way, the audience got used to the rhythm of the MC, not to that of the acts. Moreover, the MC was often a big name. Now I have the experience to know if the setting of a comedy room works or not, I can look at it and say: it’s too long, it’s too short, the seating, the lighting... In Greece, you struggle against these things all the time. Not only that, but audiences are used to watch comedy for free.

GP – What about the role played by television?

KV – There are no comedians on television: they don’t have them in news programmes, they don’t have them as panellists, nothing. People who make TV in Greece would not know how to make a stand-up comedy show. It would be great to do an equivalent of Live at the Apollo, but it’s difficult when you only have eleven professional comedians. Despite all that, I am interviewed on TV all the time. I have done the only live five-minute stand-up comedy spot on TV that there ever was, it was never done before and it has never been done again since. There is this big political satirist, the biggest in Greece, called Lakis Lazopoulos, who used to be loved and now is reviled, few people still like him, but most people hate him. Comedians hate him because he copies material, he copied Louis C.K., most famously\(^\text{167}\). So, he has this political show, but he has become so populist, he has been appealing to the lowest instincts, which is sad, because he was one of the best writers we had.

GP – Sorry, I lost the connection with you, there.

KV – Well, the connection is that I appeared on his show, the first of the season, which has the highest ratings, something like 36% of audience share.

GP – What kind of material is expected by the audience, in Greece? You talked about the fact that a lot of comedy there is based on stereotypes. Is it what they expect from stand-up comedy too?

\(^\text{167}\) Again, if this is the case, then it represents one more act of allographic covert translation. It was not possible, however, to verify this statement independently from Vrana’s account.
KV – No, because people who go to watch stand-up comedy are those people who expect more.

GP – You mentioned that mental issues and disabilities are a taboo topic in Greece. Would you like to elaborate?

KV – Yes, in Greece disabled people do not go out much, they are often kept indoor because they are a bit of a shame for the family. Moreover, there is no real awareness about mental problems. Not to mention the taboos about sex. Here in the UK, for instance, the word “dick” is not necessarily offensive, but in Greek the equivalent is “poutsa”, which is considered very offensive.

GP – Don’t you have a range of different words, with a different grade of offensiveness?

KV – Yes, but they are all very heavy. I developed my sex-themed show in English, so when I first did it in Greek, for the first couple of performances there was awkward silence, because I hadn’t worked out yet what the taboo bits were. I didn’t know what parts built up tension and what parts released it, while I know it now. More generally speaking, another difficulty I found is that the two languages sometimes are competing inside my mind. For a while, I had to struggle to avoid using English words instead of Greek ones. Now, when I forget a Greek word, it seems that the English word is not there any longer either, as if my English got offended and left me.

GP – You learned both languages at the same time, right?

KV – Yes, that’s correct.

GP – Is that the reason why you don’t have a Greek accent when you speak in English?

KV – Yes, but I also seem to have some sort of roaming accent syndrome. Anyway, I always feel that English and Greek expressions are competing inside my brain, so I’m looking for one expression in one language and I can’t remember either of them, in either language. It’s as if my brain sometimes was telling me: you wanted two languages, now you are on your own!

GP – Don’t you think that there might also be advantages in being bilingual? For instance, they say that bilingual people have a more developed metalinguistic awareness, that they are more
conscious about the workings of language and of the differences between languages. Don’t you agree?

KV – Massively so! I wanted to do an entire show about languages, but it would have appealed to you, me and three other people. I was thinking, for instance, of how languages in neighbouring countries show the relationship these countries have. For example, words that in Persian are names are swear words in Greece. So, in Persian Malaki is a name and Moonie is also a name, while in Greek “malakas” is “wanker” and “muni” is “cunt”. I don’t know why I find these things fascinating. For instance, “cazzo” in Italian is “dick” but “katso” in Greek means “to sit”... be careful what you sit on, Giacinto! “Putsa” in Greek is a dick, while “puzza” in Italian is a very strong smell. In Finland, “cazzo” mean “look!”. So, you can see the relationship between Northern and Southern European, with the Finnish saying: “Oh, look, a Greek person is going to sit an Italian penis!”. To which we would reply “oho oho oho”, which to them would just reminds of Santa Claus, who lives in Finland. Anyway, that’s a sample of my material about languages. Also, in German Putzenfrau is a cleaner, but in Greece that is clearly a prostitute, given the meaning of putsa. This also explain the misunderstandings between the Germans and the Greeks about the financial situation in Greece: it’s all about languages. The Germans keep trying to tell us: “We want to help you to clean” and all we can hear is: “We are going to get fucked”.

GP – Aha aha, I don’t think we can improve on that. Thank you very much.

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168 In a personal communication, Dr Dimitris Asimakoulas commented: I disagree with this point – ’translating' from other languages phonologically or lexic ally is hilarious in Greek and has been used in various programmes; there is even a satirical show (Radio Arvyla 2008-2016) that is massively popular and features entire sections of the programme in pseudo-Spanish/German/French; also, in the 1990s Lakis Lazopoulos, mentioned above, used to have such sketches (mainly in pseudo-Turkish/English). That, coupled with the fetishization of foreign language learning in Greece creates a very exuberant language-joke canvas (unlike the UK, for instance)”.

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I have known and sometimes performed with English comedian Francis Foster for many years, very much enjoying his *miserabilist* style of humour, when he posted on social media that he had gone to Spain to open for Eddie Izzard in Spanish. He kindly agreed to discuss that experience in the present interview, which was collected in London on 14 December 2016.

GP – First of all, can you give me a bit of background on you as a comedian? When and why did you start?

FF – Sure. I did my first gig on 1 August 2009. I started because, as every comedian, I was delusional, I thought I had something relevant to say, and because my life is a mess. These are the only three reasons why you start. For a while I did a gig a week, which I mixed with drinking and drinking took priority. That meant that I didn’t write consistently, I didn’t really focus on my work. Moreover, I was starting my career as a teacher and that took all my time and energy. In 2012, I left my teaching job and I decided that I really wanted to do comedy, that I wanted to dedicate myself to it. At the end of 2013 I reached a competition final, while in 2015 I came third in the former Hackney Empire New Act of the Year award.

GP – All this in English, right?

FF – Yes, all this in English.

GP – Can you explain how you ended up in Spain opening for Eddie Izzard in Spanish?

FF – Yes, I did a gig at Angel Comedy club, where I opened, it was a Wednesday new acts and new material night and Eddie Izzard was in the audience. At first I didn’t give much importance to this, because when you do comedy at a certain level, or you have been doing it for a certain time, you are used to having in the audience agents or other people of importance, so I just did my gig. I’ll be honest with you: I didn’t have a great gig, so I went to a burger restaurant across the road and got myself a burger, because I don’t drink anymore, so I can’t use alcohol to soothe my feelings of inadequacy and I use food instead. I bumped into another comedian, who was going back to Angel Comedy because he was closing the night, so I thought of going back with him. After the gig, I saw a friend of mine talking with Eddie Izzard, at first I thought of walking away, but at the end I joined them. Eddie asked me if what I said on stage was true, particularly
about my mum voting for Brexit despite the fact that she is Venezuelan. I said: of course it’s true, I can’t make something like that up. At that point Eddie asked me: would you like to open for me in Barcelona? I nearly spat my drink on his shoes! Better, on his rather lovely painted leather boots. Of course I said yes and he told me: I’m going to be in Barcelona on these dates, so see you there. I took the email of his PA, I sent an email to her and I booked myself a flight to Barcelona, where I stayed with a friend.

GP – How long time did you have before that?

FF – All this happened on Wednesday and I was in Barcelona on Friday. I didn’t hear from the PA until Saturday and I thought: I made a massive mistake, nothing is going to happen, it’s just a dream! I was consumed by doubts, because I can just make a living from comedy, so I told to myself: you have come here to spend money you don’t have in a city you can’t afford! I was very down and upset about it. On Saturday evening, though, I received the email, asking me to go and support Eddie. One of the caveats explained to me is that it would need to be in Spanish. I was asked to open for Eddie at the Teatre del Raval on the Sunday night. I would do two gigs, one on Sunday night and one on Monday. So, I did the first gig in Spanish and that was a real challenge.

GP – Why was that?

FF – Because I never gigged in Spanish before. The rhythm is different, what make people laugh is different. If you have a joke in English with the funny word at the end of the sentence, that might not be the case any longer in Spanish. I asked my mum for help in translating my jokes: that was a fascinating experience. The first gig was very tough, because I didn’t realise that I was performing in Spanish in Barcelona but in front of a crowd that was mostly comprised of [English-speaking] expats.

GP – Why were you performing in Spanish, then?

FF – Because Eddie is very upset about where society is going, how far right it’s going, about how isolationist the UK is becoming, as well as the US with Trump. He believes that one way to counter this is by learning languages and performing comedy in other languages, to show that comedy is universal and at the end we are all the same. He also wants to break the record of performing in as many different countries as possible.
GP – So the audience were mainly composed of expats because they were the only one to know about Izzard? I mean, wasn’t the Spanish audience targeted at all?

FF – Well, the gig was marked as in English and “poco poco en español”. Eddie did an hour and ten minutes in English, then he came out and he did an encore in Spanish.

GP – Ok, now I understand why the audience was mostly composed of expats. It must have been difficult for you to choose the material to do, given this inconsistency between target audience and language, right?

FF – Indeed, so what I decided to do was to pick my most accessible jokes, my simplest ones, the ones that were most based on stereotypes and were quite “cartoony”. The first gig I did was tough, was like being an open spot\textsuperscript{169} again. I found the rhythm very challenging.

GP – What kind of material did you choose?

FF – I did my Latino material: about my Venezuelan mum and so on. As I said, the first time was very tough, so I asked a friend of mine for advice and he said: they are mostly expats, so you need to refer to that. I listened to the recording of my first gig and cut out what did not work, I decided to do a 7-8 mins set, but a good one.

GP – How long was the first set?

FF – It was 10-15. So, at the end I talked about Spanish people speaking English and English people speaking Spanish, particularly how bad the latter are at it, and it went very well, both with the expats and the Spaniards.

GP – Did you write down the text of your Spanish sets, before the performance?

FF – Yes, I did.

GP – For both sets?

FF – No, only for the first set.

GP – What did you do for your second set, then?

FF – There is this thing you do in acting when you learn your words and then you forget them and you just do it. Before my first gig, I went around Barcelona drilling the words into my brain,

\textsuperscript{169} A comedian who does only open spots, i.e. spots at comedy nights that are open to everyone.
repeating them over and over again. For the next one, instead, I just went through my material three times, and as a result I was much more fluid with it.

GP – Do you think that the lack of fluidity was one of the reasons why your first set did not work that well?

FF – Yes, I do. At the end, in order to produce a strong eight-minute set at my second night, I must have gone through ten hours’ work, including the translation and the rehearsal.

GP – I imagine one of the problems for you was the lack of opportunities to try your Spanish set on the stage, apart from using your first gig as a try out for your second, right?

FF – Yes, that was all the opportunities I had.

GP – Does your material include any wordplay?

FF – No.

GP – And what about cultural references? Did you have to do any adaptation?

FF – I have this joke where I say “I’m not the typical Latino male”. That usually goes very well, but I had to cut it out.

GP – Because it was based on the British perception of Latino males, you mean?

FF – Indeed.

GP – Going back to your material about the difficulty for English-speaking people to learn Spanish, you also said that the audience was mostly made of expats, so you made them laugh at themselves, right?

FF – Yes, that’s correct.

GP – And what about laughing at the host community?

FF – Yes, there was a bit of that as well. One joke was about the fact that when Spaniards speak English they sound sexy, so they things like: [in a Spanish accent] “Hello, my name is Juan Manuel, I’ve come here to make love to your women and work in Pret-a-Manger”. That went very well.

GP – Before going to Barcelona, did you know anything about the Spanish comedy scene?
FF – No, but this reminds me of the fact that in Barcelona some English people came to me and said: “When we heard that you were a Spanish comedian, our heart sank, because Spanish comedy is shit”. I’m not saying that this is the case, I have never seen Spanish comedians, so I can’t possibly comment on that.

GP – I find the entire situation quite paradoxical: English-speaking expats in Spain who go to see a famous English comedian, probably because they are a bit bored of Spanish comedy, and they find an English comedian doing comedy in Spanish! I can understand why it might have been confusing. How did Eddie Izzard go? Did you notice any difference between how his English and his Spanish sets went?

FF – The English one went better.

GP – Spanish is a new language for him, right?

FF – Yes, he’s fluent in French and semi-fluent in German, but Spanish is quite new for him.

GP – Did you develop any new joke in Spanish, which does not have any equivalent in English?

FF – Yes, I have written one joke but I didn’t have the chance to try it out. It goes: “I learned Spanish from my mother, which means that the very first words of Spanish I learned were ‘¿Qué coño estás haciendo?’, which means ‘What the fuck are you doing?’”.

GP – Of course in the Spanish version it doesn’t need the English translation, right?

FF – Right.

GP – You mentioned the lack of opportunities to try things out in Spanish. That reminds me that you are planning to set up a Spanish comedy night in London, correct?

FF – Yes, I see Spain and Latin America as places where there is much demand for comedy, because they don’t have much of it. Barcelona now is like London in the ’80s, in terms of comedy.

GP – Do you mean when the Alternative Comedy scene was breaking out?

FF – Yes, there is an open mic gig in Barcelona and it gets 80 people in every week, despite being terrible.
GP – So your plan for a comedy night in London for the Spanish speaking community is actually aimed, at the end, to export it to the Spanish speaking countries?

FF – Yes, ideally I would like to go to South America and do some gigs there.

GP – Going back to the translation, how helpful was your mother with it? What kind of advice did she give you?

FF – My mother has quite a good sense of humour, so she went through the set and she said “That doesn’t make any sense”, “That’s not funny”, while some other jokes she really liked.

GP – Was that the Spanish version already?

FF – No, it was the English version.

GP – Well, you didn’t need to know what worked in English, right?

FF – No, but her comments were on what she thought would work in Spanish.

GP – I see, she was telling you what she thought would or would not work in the perspective Spanish translation, right?

FF – Yes, that’s correct.

GP – Wasn’t she very different from your target audience, even excluding the expats?

FF – Yes, completely different.

GP – Changing subjects, you took part few times to the London Puma comedy club. How was the experience?

FF – I really loved it.

GP – Did you think the audience there got your English jokes, without any problem?

FF – Yes.

GP – I’m asking this question because sometimes when English comedians do not get the response they expect from that audience, they are always ready to blame it on the audience’s English proficiency.
FF – No, as a comedian, it’s always your fault. If in front of an audience made mostly of Italians you do a joke about *Thomas the Tank Engine*, they are not likely to get the reference, so it’s your fault, not their fault. I hate when people blame the audience. Obviously, if they are drunk or “heckley”, they are in the wrong, but apart from that, it’s up to you to be sensible with the choice of material.

GP – Will your Spanish gig in London be bilingual or monolingual?

FF – We’ll see, I don’t even know if it’s going to work, it’s pointless trying to predict these things.

GP – Did you ever live in Spanish speaking countries?

FF – I went to Venezuela every year for 22 years.

GP – How did it feel to perform in Spanish?

FF – The first time it felt like it didn’t make any sense, but the second time felt much better, it felt more fluid. Now, going back to English, I feel that the experience has awaken a part of me, now I feel much more relaxed in English too, more fluid. Eddie actually predicted that it would happen, that coming back to English everything would appear much easier.

GP – That’s interesting, you are not the first person who said that to me. Changing subject, did you notice any difference in the perception of taboos?

FF – I don’t think I crossed any taboo line. I don’t think that there are many taboo subjects in comedy.

GP – From what you said, you seem to derive comedy from some sort of cultural clash. How do you think this squares with the universalistic ideas behind Izzard’s project?

FF – Well, comedy is universal in the sense that everybody enjoys jokes, listening to them and laughing to them. However, some comedy is more universal than other. If you do a routine about the 57 bus going from… do you know what I mean? If you take that bus, you’ll love it, while if you do it to an audience of people in Madrid, it’s not going to work.

GP – On the subject of language, some of my other participants told me that they find English more “punchy”, as they say, than for instance Italian. Do you agree?
FF – Yes, for example, I think that it’s always good to put a hard sound in a punch line. That’s easier to do in English than in Spanish, which is more of a gentle language, it’s more melodic. Those “punchy” words that might cause explosive laughter are harder to come by, in my experience.

GP – Do you think that’s why in Latin countries there is not such a strong tradition of wordplay?

FF – No, I think that’s because wordplay is shit. No, I’m joking. I think that the reason why, more in general, we have comedy in this country is because we need comedy: here it’s dark, it’s damp, it’s cold, it’s miserable, it’s horrible... we really need it. On the other hand, it’s much less needed in lots of other places in the world. That’s also why some of the most popular music comes from the UK. In particular, those Northern cities that are so dark, damp and miserable, they produce amazing music. I think that creativity flourishes when there is misery. Why would you be inside if you can be outside?

GP – Well, Ancient Greece was a very creative society, don’t you think? The same applies to Renaissance Italy.

FF – I think it’s different, because those civilisations were more about telling stories and, as Eddie said, that comes from the campfire, it’s where all stories come from. Comedy and music, instead, are more introspective. Or maybe I’m wrong and I’m just talking nonsense.

GP – I think this is it, thank you very much for the interview.

FF – You are welcome.
### A.11 Index of themes

#### Personal context and experience

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<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
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<th>F. Bonomi</th>
<th>K. Sunshine</th>
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<td>Feeling that second language competence is too poor to even attempt performing in the second language</td>
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<td>Doing stand-up comedy because it looks easier than theatre (due to the apparent spontaneity)</td>
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Table 3: Personal context-related themes in the interviews.
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<td>Being “very scripted” when starting comedy (regardless of language), but becoming more “unscripted” with experience</td>
<td>G. Garofalo, R. Puma, L. Cupani, A. Taurino, F. Bonomi, K. Sunshine, M. Bertnér, F. De Carlo, K. Vrana, F. Foster</td>
<td>31-42</td>
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<tr>
<td>When writing material, the choice of language is based on the language associated with the field of experience the material originated from</td>
<td>G. Garofalo, R. Puma, L. Cupani, A. Taurino, F. Bonomi, K. Sunshine, M. Bertnér, F. De Carlo, K. Vrana, F. Foster</td>
<td>73-77</td>
<td>1152-1155</td>
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<tr>
<td>A word or expression in the other language can trigger code-switching</td>
<td>G. Garofalo, R. Puma, L. Cupani, A. Taurino, F. Bonomi, K. Sunshine, M. Bertnér, F. De Carlo, K. Vrana, F. Foster</td>
<td>77-79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notes are written in both languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
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<td>Not being interested in wordplay</td>
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<td>Importance of developing / editing material “on the stage”</td>
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<td>Notes reflect the spontaneous formation of ideas (they are loosely structured)</td>
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<td>Notes can contain elements that are unrelated to comedy</td>
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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>Even when the script is written word-by-word, performances don’t strictly follow it</td>
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<td>Changes are developed during performances and are not transferred to the written script</td>
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<td>After too many repetitions a show becomes “stale”</td>
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<td>The choice of the language in which to write material depends on the target audience or event</td>
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<td>Writing material on paper (or digitally) word-by-word</td>
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<td></td>
<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>Not writing material on paper (or digitally) word-by-word</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not writing material on paper (or digitally) at all</td>
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<td>Using recordings to help recollection</td>
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<td>Some material is written “with the two languages in mind”</td>
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<td>Comedy material “comes to mind already formed”</td>
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<td>Oral material is not completely spontaneous, but it requires much preparation</td>
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<td>Scripts might need to be written word-by-word because of TV regulations</td>
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<td>Importance of testing material in front of an audience</td>
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<td>Limitations to the competence in English / the non-dominant language can stimulate creativity</td>
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<td>In a long comedy set, themes might emerge instead of being intentionally planned</td>
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<td>Short comedy sets might not require preparatory notes</td>
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<td>The sequence of topics in a long comedy set vary between performances</td>
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<tr>
<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing jokes word-by-word, but improvising the links</td>
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<td>1091-1092</td>
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Table 4: Material development-related themes in interviews.
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<th>Translation does not start from the written script in the source language</th>
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<td>Translation starts from a written script in the source language</td>
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<td>1895-1897</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes translation is improvised on stage</td>
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<td>85-86</td>
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<td>Translation can offer the opportunity to become less “scripted”</td>
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<td>86-88</td>
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<tr>
<td>when the punch line is culture-specific, it requires time spent (in advance to the performance) looking for the right replacement</td>
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<td>96-101</td>
<td>1330-1334</td>
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<tr>
<td>the need to adapt punch lines in translation is an opportunity to write better ones</td>
<td>100-101</td>
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<td>translated punch lines sometimes are back-translated</td>
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<tr>
<td>meta-linguistic aspects, such as rhyme and rhythm, cannot be kept in translation</td>
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<td>2159-2161</td>
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<td>Bilingual notes are used to produce monolingual performances</td>
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<tr>
<td>The English language is more apt to stand-up comedy (than the other language in the pair)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling that the translated material was less comically effective than the original</td>
<td>318-337</td>
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<td>Culture-specificity of the original material can be unconscious</td>
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<td>When a translated punch line requires adaptation, it is more likely to be written down word-by-word</td>
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<td>569-573</td>
<td>650-717</td>
<td>938-950</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulties to translate parts of material might result in them being removed from performances in the target language</td>
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<td>2341-2343</td>
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<tr>
<td>Translation / transfer to another culture might require considerations of potentially different taboo sensitivities</td>
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<td>533-561</td>
<td>650-717</td>
<td>938-950</td>
<td>1423-1429</td>
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<td>2238-2249</td>
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Despite the “local” difficulties, translated performances are “globally” successful.

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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>F. De Carlo</td>
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<td>K. Vrana</td>
<td>2104-2107</td>
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Punch lines that are based on particular linguistic expressions, such as idioms or dead metaphors, are difficult to translate.

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<td>F. Foster</td>
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Translation mostly occurs from Italian / the more dominant into English / the less dominant language.

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<tr>
<td>Stricter rules governing word order in English makes it difficult to translate jokes from Italian while keeping the punch line at the end</td>
<td>1286-1293</td>
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<td>The choice of what material to transfer to a new language/comedy scene is by exclusion of what is predicted not to work</td>
<td>1123-1125</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performing in English / the non-dominant language offers an opportunity to edit material</td>
<td>1146-1149</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material based on wordplay is excluded from translation</td>
<td>1157-1158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domesticating references might make the translated material less interesting</td>
<td>1496-1506</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some forms/topics of humour are universal</td>
<td>1547-1555</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transferability of cultural references can be monodirectional</td>
<td>1654-1658</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
<th>F. Bonomi</th>
<th>K. Sunshine</th>
<th>M. Bertnér</th>
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<td>There is much overlapping of</td>
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<td>material content between sets</td>
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<td>in the two languages</td>
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<td>2052-2058</td>
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<td>Translation is easier than</td>
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<td>generally thought</td>
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<td>In the choice of what material</td>
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<td>to translate, the most tested</td>
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<td>2044-2046</td>
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<td>material is preferred</td>
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<td>Need to adapt culture-specific</td>
<td>98-102</td>
<td>564-571</td>
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<td>1330-1334</td>
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<td>references</td>
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Table 5: Translation-related themes in interviews.
Effects of language / translation on performance

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<tr>
<th>Feeling “worried” / “scared” about performing in Italian / the dominant language</th>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
<th>F. Bonomi</th>
<th>K. Sunshine</th>
<th>M. Bertnér</th>
<th>F. De Carlo</th>
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<td>522-523</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling “limited” when performing in English / the non-dominant language</th>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
<th>F. Bonomi</th>
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<td>49-54</td>
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<td>2045-2048</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling “freer” when / enjoying more performing in English / the non-dominant language</th>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
<th>F. Bonomi</th>
<th>K. Sunshine</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When performing in English / the non-dominant language, audience are more forgiving</th>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
<th>F. Bonomi</th>
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<td>63-71</td>
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<td>When performing in Italian / the dominant language, there is the option to use dialects and accents</td>
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<td>Feeling cognitively dissociated between the two languages (e.g. because of interferences from the other language during performance)</td>
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<td>2249-2260</td>
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<td>Feeling more “scripted” when performing in English / the non-dominant language</td>
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<td>360-361</td>
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<td>518-522</td>
<td>1337-1339</td>
<td>1640-1646</td>
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<td>Feeling progressively less scripted in English / the non-dominant language (when language competence improves)</td>
<td>557-560</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accent in English / the non-dominant language can be a source of humour</td>
<td>753-756</td>
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<td>Fear of being “laughed at”, instead of “laughed with”, when performing in English / the non-dominant language</td>
<td>757-759</td>
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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>Pronunciation can be a challenge for comedians performing in English / the non-dominant language</td>
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<td>1197-1200</td>
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<td>1910-1912</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence with regard to English / the non-dominant language can affect performance</td>
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<td>1205-1207</td>
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<td>1671-1676</td>
<td>2090</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not seeing “a big difference” in performance style between the two languages</td>
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<td>1672-1673</td>
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</table>
Performing in another language / country is a chance to “challenge yourself”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
<th>F. Bonomi</th>
<th>K. Sunshine</th>
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<td>1757-1760</td>
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Table 6: Performance-related themes in interviews.
Differences between the “comedy scenes” (and other social aspects of doing comedy in different languages)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>G. Garofalo</th>
<th>R. Puma</th>
<th>L. Cupani</th>
<th>A. Taurino</th>
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<th>F. De Carlo</th>
<th>K. Vrana</th>
<th>F. Foster</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In different comedy scenes, audiences might express appreciation in different ways</td>
<td>401-405</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stand-up comedians coming from the English-speaking word are bestowed with high status when performing in Italy</td>
<td>427-430</td>
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<tr>
<td>The comedy scene in Italy / the country of origin is “poorer” than in Britain</td>
<td>432</td>
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<td>2088-2091</td>
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<tr>
<td>The comedy scene in Italy / the country of origin is developing</td>
<td>433-439</td>
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<td>2193-2197</td>
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<tr>
<td>In Italy / the country of origin, there are conflicting interpretation of the meaning of “stand-up comedy”</td>
<td>445-447</td>
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<td><strong>G. Garofalo</strong></td>
<td><strong>R. Puma</strong></td>
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<td>In the Italian mainstream comedy scene (e.g. <em>Zelig laboratories</em>), improvisation and audience interaction are discouraged</td>
<td>468-476</td>
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<td>The Italian mainstream comedy scene is TV-oriented</td>
<td>477-483</td>
<td>947-966</td>
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<td>1949-2975</td>
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<tr>
<td>In Italy, the mainstream comedy scene is character-based</td>
<td>494-496</td>
<td>913-932</td>
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<td>1927-1934</td>
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<td>In Italy, the mainstream comedy scene is based on strictly codified “rituals”</td>
<td>496-502</td>
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<td>From performers who come for the Italian mainstream comedy scene, the discovery of stand-up comedy feels “liberating”</td>
<td>510-516</td>
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<td>It is mostly the newly arrived Italian comedians in London who base their humour on cultural differences</td>
<td>593-596</td>
<td>812-818</td>
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<td>When non-Italian comedians perform (in English) in front of members of the Italian community in London, their performances usually well received</td>
<td>604-610</td>
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<td>For immigrant comedians, the audience from the host community are the most important target</td>
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<td>787-795</td>
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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>Importance / utility of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival</td>
<td>798-808</td>
<td>1729-1730</td>
<td>1866-1869</td>
<td>2091-2095</td>
<td>2105-2109</td>
<td>2468-2479</td>
<td>963-965</td>
<td>1067-1085</td>
<td>988-1036</td>
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<tr>
<td>The different role played by comedy in different countries depend on different social, cultural and environmental situations</td>
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<td>The concept of <em>stand-up comedy</em> in Italy has been re-interpreted for local reasons (in opposition to the mainstream scene)</td>
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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>Stand-up comedy cannot be defined by theme or style (but only by the situation framing it)</td>
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<td>Stand-up comedy in Italy is perceived as a foreign import</td>
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<td>In Italy, comedy shows need to have a unifying theme to be considered quality shows</td>
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<td>Addressing misunderstandings between cultures (e.g. stereotypes) as a way to connect across them</td>
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<td>In the Italian alternative comedy scene (Italian “stand-up comedy”), wordplay is considered an inferior type of comedy</td>
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<td>Importance of communicating to the audience / promoters what to expect from a comedy performance</td>
<td>G. Garofalo</td>
<td>R. Puma</td>
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<td>1345-1357</td>
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<td>Italian culture as risk-adverse</td>
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<td>1415-1421</td>
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<td>In some countries (e.g. Italy and Japan), “splitting the audience” is culturally taboo</td>
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<td>1578-1579</td>
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<td>In some countries (e.g. Great Britain), “splitting the audience” is acceptable</td>
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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>When the audience members are not all bilingual, the comedian can use the language that is not shared by all members to establish a privileged channel of communication with some members</td>
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<td>1558-1560</td>
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<td>When performing in English / the non-dominant language, performers can derive humour from their difficulties with / the quirks of the language</td>
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<td>1602-1608</td>
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<td>By doing material that is personal, comedians also give expression to their cultural point of view</td>
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<td>1608-1613</td>
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<td>2008-2010</td>
<td>2056-2058</td>
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<td>G. Garofalo</td>
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<td>Irrelevance / little importance of being perceived as a foreigner when doing comedy</td>
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<td>1613-1616</td>
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<td>Relevance / high importance of being perceived as a foreigner</td>
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<td>The comedians’ knowledge of the culture of countries where they do not reside can be limited</td>
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<td>1674-1676</td>
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<td>Difference in the audience attitude / respect towards the comedian between different comedy scenes</td>
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<td>1257-1279</td>
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<td>1905-1906</td>
<td>1935-1939</td>
<td>2070-2071</td>
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<td>Importance of the comedian’s perceived “status”</td>
<td>427-430</td>
<td>793-795</td>
<td>819-820</td>
<td>1199-1200</td>
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<td>Importance of audience interaction / direct audience relationship in stand-up comedy (or Rakugo)</td>
<td>G. Garofalo</td>
<td>R. Puma</td>
<td>L. Cupani</td>
<td>A. Taurino</td>
<td>F. Bonomi</td>
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Table 7: Situation-related and interaction-related themes in interviews.
APPENDIX B: Participant information sheet

PROJECT TITLE: Oral self-translation of stand-up comedy: from mental text to performance and interaction

My name is Giacinto Palmieri and I am a Ph.D. student at the Centre for Translation Studies. I would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Before you decide to do this, you need to understand why I do this research and what it will involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and feel free to talk to others about the study if you wish.

What is the purpose of the study?

This project aims to study the phenomenon of stand-up comedians performing/translation in more than one language, with a particular focus on English and Italian.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

Because you are a stand-up comedian who regularly performs in both English and Italian.

Do I have to take part?

No, you don’t have to participate and even if you do decide to participate, you can withdraw at any time. Also, you don’t have to answer all the questions if you don’t want to or if you feel you cannot answer them.

What will my involvement require?

You will be asked to answer a set of questions (lasting about 60 minutes, including the setting up of the interview environment and the illustration of the interview’s format).

What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

There are no possible risks or disadvantages.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By sharing your experience, you will give a contribution to the understanding of a phenomenon that has not been studied before.
What happens when the research study stops?

My findings will be made available in my published thesis. A summary of my findings may also be published in a peer-reviewed journal and possibly presented in conferences.

What if there is a problem?

Any complaint or concern about any aspect of the way you have been dealt with during this study will be addressed; please contact my supervisor, Dr Dimitris Asimakoulas, Tel. + 44 (0)1483 689913.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

No, given the importance, for this study, of locating every experience within a clearly defined personal background, your responses will not be anonymised and you will be clearly identified as their originator. Consent to this treatment will be asked as part of the Consent Form, which also clarifies its terms and conditions.

Contact details of researcher:

If you have any questions about the research, feel free to contact me: Giacinto Palmieri, Centre for Translation Studies, School of English and Languages, University of Surrey, GU2 7XH. Email: g.palmieri@surrey.ac.uk, Tel: 0785 1374031.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is organised by the University of Surrey.

Who has reviewed the project?

The study has been reviewed by the Ethics Representative for the School of English and Languages.

Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet.
APPENDIX C: Interview consent form

- I the undersigned voluntarily agree to take part in the study on *Oral self-translation of stand-up comedy: from mental text to performance and interaction*.
- I have been given a full explanation by the investigators of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do.
- I agree to comply with any instruction given to me during the study and to co-operate fully with the investigators.
- I agree to an edited (and, when the need arises, translated) transcription of my contributions to this study (in the form of interviews) being published as part of the resulting Ph.D. thesis.
- I agree to renounce my anonymity with regard these contributions and to be identified as their originator in the Ph.D. thesis resulting from this study.
- I reserve the right to verify and confirm, before its inclusion into the Ph.D. thesis resulting from this study, that the transcription and translation of the contributions attributed to me are of my complete satisfaction.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.
- I acknowledge that in consideration for completing the study I will not expect to receive any pecuniary compensation.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study.

Name of volunteer (BLOCK CAPITALS) ........................................................
Signed ........................................................................................................
Date ......................................

Name of researcher/person taking consent Giacinto Palmieri
Signed ........................................................................................................
Date ......................................
References


Fleming, J. (2014) 'In order to speak and perform Italian language comedy, you have to live it'. [online] Available at: http://thejohnfleming.wordpress.com/2014/12/19/in-order-to-speak-and-perform-italian-language-comedy-you-have-to-live-it/ (Last accessed 8 January 2016).

Fortier, A. (1999) 'Re-membering places and the performance of belonging(s)', Theory, culture & society, 16 (2), pp. 41-64.


Zabalbeascoa, P. (1993) Developing translation studies to better account for audiovisual texts and other new forms of text production, Ph.D. Universitat de Lleida.

