

Racial Issues in American Stand-up Comedy

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Abstract

*The phenomenon known as stand-up comedy emerged in the late 1970s when the first live shows of this type were introduced to the public. This type of humour, which relies on ingenuity, contains a variety of topics used by comedians, such as their everyday life, religion, politics or racism. These are just a few of the topics usually employed in order to create comedy. It is curious how a serious matter such as racism, for example, can be used to trigger laughter. Eddie Griffin, an African American stand-up comedian, uses this type of topics in almost all of his shows. More than one question come to mind: Why should comedians use racism in this type of discourse? Can it be funny? Are there any special techniques applied when dealing with such a sensitive subject? Can the humour be preserved if the written version of such a show is translated? The present paper aims at finding some answers to these questions and, to this end, looks for textual evidence in Eddie Griffin's 2011 comedy show **You Can Tell 'Em I Said It**.*

Keywords: stand-up comedy, humour, racism, translating humour

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This paper deals with a new topic, the stand-up comedy. The research done in the field of comedy and humour cannot be compared with the study of stand-up comedy because the latter is yet to be discovered and analysed.

This approach represents a step forward into the study of humour. For many years now, being represented by jokes or puns, humour caught everyone's attention, but this time focus is laid on a different category of humour, i.e. stand-up comedy. This type of humour is very different, and in order to make it appealing to the public, the artist has to keep in mind that the nature of the subjects that he or she uses represent almost half of the success and that the other half is represented by the connection he or she has with the audience, as well as by the way in which the message is delivered and afterwards perceived by the audience.

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According to The Oxford English Dictionary (online), humour is described as “that quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun” and that it represents “the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject”. Research in the field of humour has focused mostly on analysing stand-up comedy from the perspective of the joke, from the perspective of the text. This type of analysis is not entirely correct; a different perspective should have been used: that of analysing stand-up comedy through the performer – audience connection, and special attention should have been paid to the response given by the audience to each joke.

The 20th century represented a new beginning in the field of comedy, a time when the process of globalization reached a higher point, and everyone tried to fit in somewhere and be a part of something. To succeed in this line of business, performers used everything necessary to try and step up into the spotlight, even if that meant using topics from their everyday life, no matter how happy or sad the topics were. Furthermore, their list of jokes also included topics such as ethnicity, racism, political orientation, religion etc., to pinpoint the hatred and the negative thinking that still exists up to this moment.

One of the performers considered to be representative for the type of humour called stand-up comedy is Eddie Griffin. Actor and comedian, Eddie Griffin was born in Kansas City, Missouri and is known for his role on the Malcolm & Eddie show where he played the part of Eddie Sherman and for his performance in the movie Undercover Brother (2002).

Even if he started his career as a stand-up comedian at a young age, his 1997 comedy show Voodoo Child is what really launched him in this line of business.

But the question may arise: what is stand-up comedy? If we search the web, which lately has become a source for everything, dictionary.com states that stand-up comedy is "a comic monologue performed by one person standing on a stage; also called stand-up", this can be considered a general definition to be found in other dictionaries as well but which sadly does not contain many important details. For this reason, I turned my attention to “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation”, written in 1985 by Lawrence E. Mintz, who explains that:

Stand-up comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression (excluding perhaps truly spontaneous, informal social joking and teasing). It is the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present. (1985: 71)

According to Mintz, there is no such thing as a perfect society and people tend to make fun of it because this is their way of moving forward, making fun of the tragic past. Stand-up comedy is an art, and not many are made for this type of job, the things that can make the difference between two performers are both the audience, who can give fluidity to a show, and the actual jokes that are used.

In the past, performers of stand-up comedy such as Eddie Griffin tried their luck in this field of humour, when everything was based on wit, perseverance, personality, when the person in charge had to find out the hard way what stand-up comedy is and how to perfect their stage performance. Time passed, society changed and now those who are interested in such a career can simply buy a book that step by step will teach someone how to write and perform an act of comedy. The only difference now is in the process of learning because the topics used by artists did not change.

Racial issues are still a problem, even now, a good example being America, the country with an African-American president, a place where things evolved, society changed, information is free to the public and they have more opportunities than in the past. Racism is still alive, and people learned how to approach this matter in a more polite manner; they replace the word *nigger* with different polite rejections as Eddie Griffin points out in the following lines:

<p>You know how they say there's no more racism, You know, since Obama got the office, We got a black president, there's no more racism. They don't say nigger anymore... They just say: We're not hiring, translation nigger</p>	<p>Știți cum zic ei că nu mai e rasism, Știți, de când a fost ales Obama, Avem un președinte de culoare, nu mai e rasism. Acum nu mai zic negru... zic doar: Nu facem angajări, pe scurt - negrule</p>
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I'm sorry, your bank loan has been denied, nigger	Ne pare rău, împrumutul dumneavoastră a fost refuzat, negrule
Pull over, nigger (Griffin 2011:40)	Trage pe dreapta, negrule! (my translation)

The comedian managed to highlight the idea of racism in very important phases, government, police, financial system and employment office. Each line is followed by the word "nigger", because even if the word is not said, he knows that this is what they are thinking and that things will not change just because there is a black president.

When dealing with such a text you cannot translate everything word for word; remaining faithful to the text is desirable, but preserving the essence of the joke is also important even if it poses problems to the translator since as Newmark says "there is no such thing as a perfect, ideal or correct translation" (1988: 6).

Furthermore, it is curious how a serious matter such as racism can be used to trigger laughter. As shown above, Eddie Griffin uses this topic in all his comedy shows, thus a few questions come to mind:

Why should comedians use racism in this type of discourse?

One reason for using this type of subject is for the impact it produces and it has on others, and also because it receives attention and an immediate reaction from the audience. It is important to mention that it does not matter if the reaction is a positive or a negative one, because this is how the performer will know how to deal with the topic further on.

The answer to the question "**Can it be funny?**" is: Yes, it can be funny. In order to illustrate this, the only thing one can do is just to watch a stand-up comedy performance of Eddie Griffin and see that laughter can be produced regardless of the topic. This thing depends on how the performer acts on stage and how he interacts with the audience, because it is a known fact that if two actors perform the same joke the responses given by the audience will be very different.

Another question may arise: **Are there any special techniques applied when dealing with such a sensitive subject?**

Usually when approaching a topic like racism there are many factors that have to be taken into consideration, for example: when to

say it, how to say it, to whom and the most important thing is who the speaker is. Being an African-American, Eddie Griffin himself was confronted with racism; this is why he can speak about racism without being afraid of the repercussions. America is known for the black and white conflict and recent events such as Barack Obama, an African-American, being the president of the United States of America should have diminished this conflict, but as Eddie Griffin explained, this thing did not happen.

Can humour be preserved if the written version of such a show is translated?

The humour is not fully preserved. The text poses some difficulties in the process of translation, but the real problem is represented by cultural differences. A translated version of the text will never receive the same reaction from an audience in Romania because this is something specific to a certain country, and in America this conflict is still very active.

In a comedy show, the text is very important and the comedians, almost all the time, use jokes that are very well written and that are sure to produce laughter. Mention should be made that if you analyse only the text, without seeing or hearing the show, it will not impress you and the reaction will not be the desired one. For most of it, some can consider it to be similar to a satire, but not to a funny text.

Eddie Griffin approached this type of subject and tried telling the truth during his performances in a humorous manner that would influence his audience in a positive manner. He did everything by pointing out the obvious problems society has in order to fix them. His jokes were made with a purpose. He attempts at proving that racism is still a very important topic; even so, his audience was pleased by his performance and all of his jokes and funny stories were received in a positive way with laughter and applause.

In this area of comedy there is still one disadvantage, knowing that this type of shows are live and are held in locations such as arenas, theatres, the audience is made up of persons with different religion, culture, beliefs, etc. On stage everything can change in a moment, in one second one can turn failure into success and vice-versa. However, Eddie Griffin manages to keep the audience concentrated and always focuses on what he is saying, because this is what keeps the show alive and the jokes to advance in a natural way.

Throughout the show, the audience responds in a positive way to the jokes the performer makes, thus providing him a suitable

environment for joke telling. To improve the quality of the jokes, the artist resumes to hand gestures or face mimics, he also manages to put together a real-time conversation, turning his head from right to left as if he were facing someone, using different types of accents and gestures.

The audience represents a key factor in the good development of these shows, because no matter their gender, religion and nationality they are all American citizens.

To sum up, the new branch of humour, i.e. stand-up comedy, receives the deserved attention. Analysing stand-up comedy from all points of views is what makes this study more valuable than a regular analysis of a funny text. This art is not just about the humorous text, the audience and the connection established by the performer are valuable details in the process of analysing this type of comedy, and the laughter during a show can help people go above prejudice, misinterpreted situations and wrong conceptions.

Even if the phenomenon known as stand-up comedy emerged in the late 1970's, it received the deserved attention at the beginning of the 2000s, when, thanks to the internet, many amateur performers started a career in this domain. This type of humour, which relies on ingenuity, contains topics used by comedians, usually employed in order to create comedy, such as their everyday life, jokes, funny moments from their past, as well as topics such as religion, politics or racism. Eddie Griffin uses this type of topics in almost all of his shows and he succeeds in receiving laughter from those present, even if he tackles a delicate subject like racism.

As shown above, the conclusion can be drawn that humour in the form of stand-up comedy is more than what meets the eye and that a live performance is not an easy task, which Eddie Griffin proves. It can really be said that there is no such thing as a forbidden topic for a well prepared stand-up comedian such as Eddie Griffin.

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