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Scripted stand-up Comedy in Translation: The Marvelous Mrs Maisel dubbed in Italian

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Abstract

*Stand-up comedy is a fascinating art form that has received much scholarly attention (e.g., Mintz, 1985; Rutter, 2000; Lockyer and Mayers, 2011; Quirk, 2015; Double, 2020; Dore, 2022). Similarly, fictional stand-up has been discussed in the literature (Bhattacharjee, 2023), yet analyses exploring the intersections and possible differences between these two phenomena seem to be lacking, with a notable exception being Salamova (2016). To help fill this gap, this study focuses on fictional stand-up routines performed by Miriam “Midge” Maisel, the main character of the TV series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino, 2017–2023). This show is worth examining due to the topics it develops and the manner in which it conveys them. Thus, the analysis first examines Midge’s fictional, fully scripted stand-up routines, including the language used (explicit language openly discussing taboo subjects like sex, religion, and politics) and the purposes it serves (to raise awareness and captivate the audience). More importantly, this work explores how Midge interacts with the audience and contrasts this with real, semi-scripted comedian-audience interactions, thereby highlighting similarities and significant differences between them. Subsequently, it investigates how the Italian dubbing, which has traditionally served as a platform for ideological manipulation, handles Midge’s explicit language. The dubbing team largely retained instances of swearing, and when certain instances were omitted, they were compensated for through creative additions (i.e., adding items in the target text [TT] that are not mentioned in the source text [ST], Ranzato, 2016, p. 95). This pattern aligns with current trends in Italian dubbing, indicating a greater degree of freedom in addressing sensitive topics (cf. Dore and Petrucci, 2021; Dore and De Nicola, 2023). However, this change may be because *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, like other popular shows, is not subject to watershed regulations. Comparative analyses between shows featured on streaming platforms and traditional broadcasters may yield different and interesting results.*



Parole chiave

Stand-up (cabaret) ;
Traduzione
audiovisiva ;
Doppiaggio ;
Linguaggio volgare ;
Tabù

Abstract

La stand-up comedy (o cabaret) è stata analizzata da diversi studiosi (ad es., Mintz, 1985; Rutter, 2000; Lockyer e Mayers, 2011;), come anche il suo utilizzo all'interno di prodotti audiovisivi (Bhattacharjee, 2023). Sembrano tuttavia mancare analisi che esplorino le intersezioni e le possibili differenze tra questi due fenomeni (a parte Salamova, 2016). Per contribuire a colmare questa lacuna, questo studio si concentra sulla serie TV La fantastica signora Maisel (Sherman-Palladino, 2017-2023), che ha riscosso enorme successo internazionale per i temi e il linguaggio utilizzato. L'analisi si concentra in primis sugli spettacoli della protagonista Miriam "Midge" Maisel, il linguaggio usato (estremamente esplicito per affrontare argomenti quali il sesso, la religione e la politica) e i fini che si prefigge (sensibilizzare e catturare l'attenzione del pubblico). Inoltre, si esamina il modo in cui Midge interagisce con il pubblico e lo si contrappone alle interazioni reali e tra comici e pubblico per evidenziarne similitudini e differenze. Si indaga altresì il modo in cui il doppiaggio italiano, che è tradizionalmente caratterizzato da manipolazione ideologica, ha gestito il linguaggio di Midge. Dall'analisi si evince come siano state mantenute le espressioni volgari e, se omesse, siano state compensate con "aggiunte creative" (ovvero inserendo nel testo di arrivo elementi non presenti in quello di partenza; Ranzato, 2016, p. 95). Tale approccio appare in linea con le tendenze attuali del doppiaggio italiano, che indicano un maggiore grado di libertà nell'affrontare argomenti tabù (cfr. Dore e Petrucci, 2021; Dore e De Nicola, 2023). Tuttavia, questo cambiamento potrebbe dipendere dal fatto che La fantastica signora Maisel, come altre serie popolari, non è soggetta alle regole relative alle fasce protette di trasmissione. Analisi comparative tra programmi presenti sulle piattaforme di streaming e network televisivi tradizionali potrebbero produrre risultati diversi e interessanti.

1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy, primarily grounded in observational content about life and current events, has consistently enjoyed widespread success (Quirk, 2015, p. 153). As performers, comedians normally develop a comic persona and make use of imaginative distortion and exaggeration to humorously mock individuals or illustrate incongruous scenarios. Interactions between comedians and their audience are partially scripted, as the comedian's routines are adjusted to suit the specific context and audience, which can vary from one event to another. Yet, stand-up comedy generally follows a standardised structure (Mintz, 1985), with a "warm-up" stage to introduce the comedians' routines and a closure, potentially including humorous remarks addressing the audience (Rutter, 2000). Like any humorous interactions, this type of encounters is socially and culturally negotiated by the participants who subscribe to a non-bona fide mode, where disbelief is suspended (Raskin, 1985, p. 100-107; Attardo, 1994, p. 286-290) and potential offences are not taken at face value (Lockyer and Mayers, 2011).



In the realm of stand-up comedy, there has always been an imbalance, with male comedians outnumbering their female counterparts (Quirk, 2015; Keisalo, 2018; Double, 2020; Dore, 2022). Among others, Joan Rivers is a noteworthy exception who gave voice to the feminist movement by addressing gender issues and biased ideas and expectations about women (Lockyer, 2011). Besides, she successfully debunked long-standing stereotypes suggesting that women lack a sense of humour and showing such notions to be products of centuries of female repression (Meisner & Mousef, 2014). It is therefore not surprising that the *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino, 2017-2023) was inspired by the life and career of this outstanding comedian (Barker and Kusiak, 2023). The main character, Miriam ‘Midge’ Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan) is an affluent, Jewish American housewife living the late 1950s and early 1960s in Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York City. Midge’s seemingly perfect life is shaken to the ground when she discovers that her husband Joel (Michael Zegen), who works as a businessman in a plastics company and is pursuing a career in stand-up comedy, has plagiarised his act and experiences a disastrous stand-up performance at the historic Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village. After Joel leaves her and their two children, Midge, fuelled by anger, takes the stage at the Gaslight, kickstarting her own career as a comic. The series has received critical acclaim nationally and internationally, as well as numerous awards, including several Primetime Emmy Awards, received by her creator Amy Sherman-Palladino. Rachel Brosnahan garnered praise for her performance, as have other cast members, including Tony Shalhoub (staring as Midge’s father Abe Weissman) and Alex Borstein (starring as Susie Mayerson, Midge’s manager).

Considering the above, this study has been conceived with a dual objective in mind. It seeks to compare fictional, fully scripted stand-up routines as portrayed in the TV series and real, semi-scripted interactions between comedians and live audiences. The analysis primarily focuses on instances within the scenes in which Mrs. Maisel challenges societal norms of her time by employing explicit language and openly addressing taboo topics such as sex, religion, and politics to engage her audience. Additionally, this work explores the handling of these themes in the Italian dubbing, which has traditionally served as a platform for *ideological manipulation* (i.e., toning down taboo topics in Audiovisual Translation; Díaz-Cintas, 2012). Therefore, the remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 briefly discusses real versus fictional stand-up comedy. Section 3 provides an overview of the existing literature on *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, while Section 4 delves into a detailed analysis of the data under examination. Finally, Section 5 offers concluding remarks on the findings derived from this research.

2. Real versus fictional stand-up comedy

Due to space limitations, this section will not provide an extensive review on stand-up comedy, which falls beyond the scope of this work. Real and fictional stand-up comedy are briefly discussed relying on the relevant literature.



Drawing on Dunleavy (2009, p. 188), Salamova (2016, p. 40) observes that the emergence of sitcoms on American television during the 1940s-1950s and the evolution of stand-up comedy in the United States were both influenced by the vaudeville culture. This explains why an engaged live audience has been crucial for both stand-up and the classic sitcom. However, while a sitcom can also thrive with prerecorded laughter instead of a live audience, a stand-up performance essentially depends on the presence of a group of listeners (Double, 2013, p. 98). This underscores the fundamental difference in the role of the audience. While in a sitcom, performers are not expected to acknowledge the audience's reactions, in stand-up the comedian creates a performance in collaboration with their spectators.

As mentioned above, the performative nature of stand-up comedy entails that comedians have a script that is ready to the audience and situation. Humour is conveyed through seemingly unfiltered, spontaneous colloquialism. The comedian's staged spontaneity is expressed through the style of their discourse, yet the comedic material is carefully crafted and organised structurally (Raffa, 2022, p. 148). Fully scripted stand-up sets are created to appear semi-improvised and the comic-audience interaction is not only acknowledged but also instrumental to the storyline. This fascinating aspect has been studied in Salamova (2016) who has investigated how comedian Luis C.K. has adapted his stand-up persona to the narrative of a TV sitcom *Lucky Louie* (Luis C.K., 2006) and dramedy *Louie* (Luis C.K., 2010-2015). Salamova has observed that this shift from performing live on stage to appearing on screen leads to a transformation in and deviation from in the comedian's persona, which is due to the impact of the television format (for similar considerations cf. Dore, 2023, on *Fleabag*). However, while *Lucky Louie* adheres to the traditional TV series format, with a storyline unfolding over multiple episodes and recurring characters encountering and eventually resolving a problem, *Louie* deviates from these norms and serves as a site for experimentation (Salamova, 2016, p. 36-37). In her words, "the transition to the context of a sitcom eliminates Louis C.K.'s ability to communicate with his audience during the performance" (ibid., p. 40). Conversely, in *Louie*, the main character also performs as a stand-up comedian, thus allowing for a closer alignment with Louis C.K.'s stage persona while providing the audience with glimpses of him both on and offstage. The hybrid blend of drama and comedy frees Louis C.K. from the pressure to always be humorous (ibid., p. 43).

Like *Louie*, *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* is a dramedy that integrates an external element such as stand-up comedy into a television narrative. Although stand-up comedy is the focal point of the series, it is also instrumental to its many other topics, including female liberation, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion. As Bhattacharjee (2023, p. 33) rightly remarks, stand-up "emerges in the show as an ethical medium of truth telling and of sociopolitical protest that challenges systemic hierarchies of gender and sexuality. Moreover, stand-up's foundational subversion is shown to lie in its serious professionalism and in its departure from other forms of art." And regarding the language used, she further notices that "the show's stand-up sequences, both Midge's and others,



evoke the obscene in order to highlight the role politics plays in defining what is disrespectful and immoral and how the obscene laughter stemming from the nether regions is harnessed to subvert mainstream hierarchies and hypocrisies” (ibid., p. 49).

However, it is worth noting that, while stand-up comedy is nowadays often seen as having a level of freedom of speech unmatched by other forms of communication (Seirlis, 2011), *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* shows that taboo subjects and offensive language were rarely acceptable in venues like TV shows, formal events, and even small clubs, where comedians risked arrest for using profanity due to strict policing.

Stand-up comedians nowadays make ample use of prompts ranging from slide presentations, email excerpts, videos, etc (Raffa, 2022). Conversely, the fictional stand-up comedy depicted in the show reminds us of a time when comedians relied solely on cards or notebooks as their prompts during performances. Besides, comedians in the past could gain huge popularity only if they managed to perform on TV, as revealed by Midge’s “four minutes” in the series’ final episode (S05-E09). In contrast, today comics’ performances can easily reach millions of people when broadcast on streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime Video.

One last difference between real and fictional stand-up is that the former is normally subtitled as the genre could hardly call for dubbing, or even partial dubbing (Chaume 2013, Dore 2019). *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* has instead been dubbed into many languages, including Italian. Hence, it is worth comparing the English original version with its Italian dubbed counterpart to evaluate how taboo humour and foul language have been tackled. However, before proceeding it is important to delve into the existing literature on the series. This discussion will offer valuable insights into the reasons for choosing it as a case study.

3. *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*

As mentioned above, *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* is a series set in the late 1950s and early 1960s, capturing the essence of the time, including the social norms and challenges faced by women in a more conservative society. The series follows Midge’s journey as she pursues a career in stand-up comedy while navigating the complexities of her personal life. Midge is mentored by Lenny Bruce, a character modelled after the real-life provocative stand-up comic of the 1960s.

Some scholars attribute the series’ success to the unprecedented presence and growing mainstream recognition of female comedians (Mizejewski and Sturtevant, 2017, p. 8, as cited in Bhattacharjee, 2023, p. 36; cf. also Dore, 2023 for similar considerations about *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2017-2019). Aarons and Mierowsky (2020) examine how Midge develops her comic persona while touching on the hallmarks of American stand-up, while Geng (2023) examines the series’ dialogue from a pragmatic perspective. As mentioned above, Bhattacharjee (2023) argues that Midge is modelled into the classic comic personas of the “bawd” and the “bitch” (as portrayed by Joan River and others) to challenge structural injustices and affirm the radical force of stand-up



humour (ibid., 36-37). However, in my opinion, Midge is an example of present day ‘postfeminist humour’ (Dore, 2023), in accordance to Gill’s (2017, p. 149) definition that ‘postfeminism’ considers femininity as intrinsic, shifting focus from objectification to subjectification, and emphasising individualism, natural sexual differences, sexualisation, consumerism, and commodification of difference. Here, I argue that Midge exposes these aspects, which are sometimes in direct contradiction, to equally make fun and critique both men’s and women’s peculiarities.

Although enjoying worldwide success, to the best of my knowledge, only one study has been published on the AVT of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. Tee et al. (2022) have examined the fansubbed (i.e., amateur subtitling) Chinese version of the series and, among other things, they have found that humour and vulgar words were mostly avoided (ibid., p.16). These findings seem to contradict existing studies showing fansubbing as adhering more closely to the ST (Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz-Sánchez, 2006; Dore, 2019), even when dealing with swearing and taboo topics (cf. Beseghi, 2016; Dore and Petrucci, 2021). It is therefore interesting to conduct research on the way taboo humour and swearing were transferred into Italian via dubbing, which allows for the complete deletion of the original soundtrack.

4. Data collection and analysis

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel comprises five seasons (henceforth, S01, S02, S03, etc.), with a varying number of episodes (henceforth, E01, E02, etc.) each approximately 60-minute long, ranging from eight to ten episodes per season, and totalling 43 episodes in all. Aside from Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch), the fictional female comic icon, Midge is the only comedian featured in the series, thus confirming the ongoing gender imbalance between male and female comedians. In fact, this gender disparity is one of the central themes of the series, as the following analysis will demonstrate. Before delving into specific examples, it is important to provide a detailed explanation of the data collection process. As mentioned earlier, this study focuses solely on Midge’s routines and the way they are scripted to appear semi-improvised, fostering a believable comic-audience interaction. The sets of other comedians (e.g., Joel’s dreadful routines, Lenny Bruce’s or Sophie Lennon’s shows) have not been considered. Throughout the 43 episodes, Midge performs a total of 50 acts, most of which are solo performances (except for two performances with another comedian, during which they exchange banter). Her routines range from small stage acts at the Gaslight Café to home performances, supporting acts for singer Shy Baldwin (LeRoy McClain), and appearances on TV shows.

4.1 Scripted comedian-audience interaction

Although comedians typically have 10 to 20 minutes onstage, Midge’s performances in the series vary from a couple of lines during the teaser¹ of the episode to

¹ A ‘teaser’ described as a comedic part that initiates an episode and may or may not be linked to the subsequent storyline (Attardo, 1998, 241).



monologues that rarely exceed five minutes. This variation is clearly a cinematic strategy used to advance the storyline within the fifty-minute runtime of each episode.

Midge experiences unsuccessful performances (she ‘bombs’, in stand-up terminology), but this is part of the process of becoming a professional (Bhattacharjee, 2023, p. 38). These failures are also instrumental to the storyline as Midge decides to start performing during house parties, which helps her unload the pressure of stage performances (S01-E06). Susie eventually convinces her to continue pursuing professional stand-up. Another example of Midge’s unsuccessful performance that is connected to the series’ developing events can be found in S03-E02 when she talks about her relationship with Susie as a manager. This happens mainly because Midge looks at Susie, who is in the audience, and indirectly refers to issues of loyalty, things to which other people can hardly relate. In another case (S04-E07), Midge takes the stage at a JFK campaign event, but her jokes about cheating husbands upset Jackie Kennedy and cause all the other ladies in the audience to fall silent in embarrassment.

Like typical comedians who provide instances of ‘observational comedy’ related to everyday life, Mrs Maisel when onstage shares her perspectives on personal traumas (being left by her husband who cheated on her) and social and cultural issues (struggling as a female comedian, facing constant scrutiny based on her appearance, personal relationships, and parenting abilities). Furthermore, Midge makes fun of members of her family (e.g. mother, father, ex-husband, children) and their idiosyncrasies. This presents an ethical challenge because the comedian leverages private family humour for public performances (Fiadotava, 2020, p. 7). This becomes one of the underlying themes of the series, as reflected in the way Midge’s family’s reaction changes over time. For instance, in S01-E08, Midge makes fun of Joel’s reproachable behaviour, seemingly unaware of the fact that he is in the audience. However, even if she were aware, she would not feel any discomfort in exploiting this topic for humorous purposes since it is the reason her career as a comedian started. Subsequently, in S03-E04, Joel is again in the audience, but his attitude has changed. Despite still unable to cope with the stark honesty of Midge’s comedic portrayal of their real-life personal situations, he urges her to continue because she embodies the quintessential qualities of a good comic, being authentic and truthful (Bhattacharjee, 2023, p. 41-42).

The same applies to Abe and Rose, Midge’s father and mother. For instance, in S02-E05, Midge is performing at a hotel while on holiday with the whole family at Steiner’s Resort in the Catskill Mountains. Her bold jokes about sex and her parents are very successful until she notices the disapproving look in her father’s eyes in the audience. She starts panicking and talking about the difficulties of maintaining a healthy relationship with a father when you are a grown woman and continues to joke about hers and her parents’ sex life. Very upset, eventually her father can only say “I’m taking you home”. When Midge starts presenting and performing as supporting acts at a strip club, she makes fun of her father, unaware that her mother is in the audience. Rose is appalled by Midge’s unfiltered humour but, more importantly, she is worried this will become known and be



detrimental to her matchmaking business. When Rose confronts Midge, asking to leave the strip club, the latter vigorously defends her work, declaring she will not stop because she can say whatever she wants the way she wants (in S04-E05). Eventually, Joel, Abe, Rose and the rest of Midge's family happily support her, especially during the TV performance that paves the way to her successful career (S05-09).

The issue of freedom of speech is interesting and particularly evident when Midge performs at house parties (S01-E06), on TV for Telethon (SE02-E09), and when she works as the audience warm-up comedian in a TV game show hosted by Sophie Lennon. On all three occasions, Midge's language is significantly sanitised to match respectively the elegant context of elegant Upper West Side in New York and the broadcasting rules of the time. Embarrassment ensues when Sophie and Midge start fighting in front of the cameras at the game show and Sophie refers to the fact that Shy Baldwin dismissed Midge as his supporting act and says "When Shy Baldwin kicked your ass..." and Midge says Sophie is "full of shit" (S04-E06).

Another phenomenon related to stand-up that is duly reported in the show is the presence of hecklers in the audience. However, in Midge's case this phenomenon can sometimes be framed as personal and sexual harassment (Bhattacharjee, 2023, p. 40). Example 1 shows how she manages to keep hecklers under control.

Example 1. S01-E08. Context: Midge is onstage.

Man [visibly drunk]: Hey, go home and clean the kitchen".

Midge: Oh, sir, I'm Jewish. I pay people to do that (audience laughter)

Man: Women aren't funny.

Midge: Your wife must have a sense of humour... She's seen you naked (loud laughter; audience oohs) [the man stands up offended] I'm sorry. I thought we were truth telling.

Man: You're a dumb bitch.

Midge: Oh, who told you? (laughter) [the man leaves].

Midge: What can I say? All the good men are taken, ladies (laughter and applause).

This excerpt shows deep-rooted stereotypical misconceptions that women are not funny (Tosun et al. 2018) and if they are, they are perceived as transgressive to the extent that they are likened to men (Keisalo, 2018, p. 554). This perception arises from their adoption of a humorous style typically associated with men (Dore, 2023) or, as mentioned earlier, the classic comic personas of the "bawd" and the "bitch". Matter-of-factly, Midge's language is often loaded with expletives and overtones that seem to shock both men and women in the audience, as shown above. Using foul languages and discussing themes such as sex are two important and distinctive elements of the series as Midge is attempting to break the rules of social conventions in the 1950s-1960s America, according to which women had to be perfect and mannered housewives. I will return to this issue in



Subsection 4.2, where I discuss the Italian dubbing of foul language.

Another interesting (but heckler-free) instance of comic-audience interaction can be found in S02-E09. Midge tries out some material and asks for the audience's feedback. At one point, she talks about her dreadful experiences with married men, and a man in the audience utters, 'I will marry you!' to which she promptly responds, 'Who's that? Cousin Shmuly? Come on, man, we've talked about this,' eliciting laughter from the audience.

In the opening episode of the third season, Midge performs in front of a crowd of soldiers in an Army base, managing to entertain and engage them without allowing any impolite or sexist behaviour. In fact, she makes mild references to her female body but also delivers amusing jokes (e.g., talking about hypothetical magazines articles for soldiers: "Camouflage: How to Stand Out while Blending in" (laughter)... And for you generals in the audience, "How to Take Care of Your Privates" (whooping, applause)), sometimes implying the soldiers' promiscuity while abroad. As expected in such a context at that time, Midge's language is free from swearing or expletives.

As mentioned earlier, in S04 Mrs Maisel starts performing as a comedian at a strip club and the comic-audience interaction becomes extremely challenging. Once a man throws "an oily, crumpled dollar bill" at her asking her to strip. Midge skilfully manages to keep the situation under control by mentioning that corset and outfit is too complicated to undo, and they may not enjoy the process. As any comedian, Midge also provokes her audience and the men attending a strip club are easy to make fun of with sentences such as "How many wives know you are here tonight? (laughter). Little news for you. ALL of them!" (prolonged laughter; S04-E04). Like in real stand-up shows, the targets of these potentially disparaging comments do not take offence at face value (Lockyer and Mayers, 2011).

Amidst these plausible interactions, some more debatable cases arise. For example, in S02-E01, Midge performs in Paris, where her parents have temporarily relocated. Despite not speaking a word of French, she takes the stage. Spotting a fellow American who is fluent in French, Midge asks her to interpret for her. Performing after three drag queens, Midge lightly pokes fun at their beautiful outfits and makeup, jokes about the differences between French and American women, and then shares her story, including her husband's betrayal and her decision to pursue comedy. The multilingual aspect is fascinating, but the interpretation of Midge's performance is clearly implausible in terms of speed and accuracy. The suspension of disbelief is necessary to make the scene plausible.

One final example that challenges our idea of what a stand-up routine entails can be found in S05-E03. Midge is about to perform at Joel's club, and Midge's ex-in-laws are in the audience (Joel's father and mother, Moishe and Shirley). While Shirley interrupts Midge asking her what she is doing onstage, Moishe loudly tells the other people in the audience that Midge is not funny. Even when Joel tries to intervene, Moishe continues to offend Midge, suggesting she should rethink about having a career in stand-up comedy. Despite Midge's attempts to regain control of the situation and the audience, Shirley and



Moishe persist in interrupting until Midge ultimately gives up. Clearly, this entire scene has been created for the benefit of the show, rather than giving a real depiction of comic-audience interaction.

All in all, it can be concluded that, although Midge's sets in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* attempt to replicate the dynamics of real stand-up comedy, they primarily serve the storyline unfolding over the five seasons of the show. Being entirely scripted, the comic-audience interaction adequately fits the purpose. Offering her humorous take on life, sexuality, politics, feminism, war, etc. does not shy away from such topics and often employs strong language to express her opinions. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how the Italian dubbing team addressed these translation challenges.

4.2 Mrs. Maisel's coarse language translated into Italian

As mentioned in Section 4, in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* Midge performs 50 acts. Some episodes may feature two or more routines, while others may not include any. Besides, Midge tailors her routines to suit the context within which they are presented. In particular, when she interacts with strangers in intimate venues like the Gaslight Café or hotels in Las Vegas, she adopts a bold approach, incorporating expletives into her language.

A thorough examination of the English source text (ST) reveals that Midge uses a total of 140 swear words during her shows. This count encompasses all instances where Midge repeats the same expression or expletive (e.g., variations of "have sex," "sex," "fuck," "fucking," etc.), as well as two occasions where Midge says "pregnant" and "pregnancy", which, while not taboo today, was considered vulgar at that time (S02-E10). Notably, this calculation excludes the old-fashioned slang expression "make whoopee" (meaning 'have sex'), which Midge repeats three times on a TV show and likely was considered acceptable on television during the 1950s and 1960s. However, it is worth observing that in the Italian target text (TT), this expression was translated as "fare sesso," which might not align with the language used on Italian television during that era. A more plausible option could have been "darci dentro" (literally meaning 'work hard on something'), which can be used idiomatically to convey the notion of 'having a lot of sex.'

Interestingly, among the 140 instances of coarse language identified in the ST, the Italian dubbing retained 117 instances through equivalent substitution (i.e., replacing the original with a target language equivalent, e.g. "have sex" as "fare sesso", "fucker" as "coglione", "fuck" as "cazzo"). As Pavesi and Maliverno (2000, p.77) explain, the Italian equivalent of "fucking" is "fottuto." However, using "fottuto" and derivatives ("fottuta", "fottutamente") has become obsolete over time, and translators now prefer using alternative expressions. This is supported by the analysed data, as "fucking" is consistently translated into other expressions that maintain its expressive force and are therefore considered equivalents (cf. Example 2, 3 and 5). The dubbing team addressed 5 instances through 'artificial substitution' by intensification (i.e. the expressive force of the original expression intensified in translation, e.g. "make whoopee" as "fare sesso",) while 7 were



diluted (i.e. the expressive force of the original swear word was toned down in translation, e.g. “ass” as “chiappe”, buttocks, “motherfuckers” as “brutti stronzi”, lit. filthy pieces of shit). Only 11 items were omitted and replaced by utterances with no swearwords (e.g. “shit happens” as “cose che capitano, lit., things that can happen). Interestingly, the Italian TT includes 3 cases of ‘creative addition’, a sort of compensation strategy, featuring an item in the TT that is not mentioned in the ST (Ranzato, 2016, p. 95). For instance, in S01-E02, Midge says “he [your husband] tells you things” while the Italian dubbed version is “tuo marito ti dice una marea di cazzate” (your husband tells you tons of bullshit). The other examples are provided in Tables 2 and 3 and will be discussed afterward.

As pointed out above, these findings pertain specifically to Midge’s performances, and a comprehensive analysis of the entire scripts may lead to different conclusions. Nonetheless, this examination seems to confirm that Italian dubbing is currently less subject to *ideological manipulation* (Díaz-Cintas, 2012; cf. also Dore and Petrucci, 2021; Dore and De Nicola, 2023 for recent studies on swearing in Italian AVT). Yet, this may also be because *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is streamed online on Amazon Prime Video and not subject to watershed regulations, thus providing the Italian dubbing team with significant freedom in addressing taboo topics and swearing. Comparative analyses between shows featured on streaming platforms and traditional broadcasters may yield different and interesting results.

Due to space limitations, only a limited number of examples are provided here, spanning from S01 to S04 of the series. In the final season (S05), Midge performs five times if we count the video message she sends to Susie during an event where the latter receives a significant award as a manager (E06). The most important act occurs in the final episode (E09) as it sets Midge on the path to comedy stardom. Since she performs on TV at *The Gordon Ford Show*, Midge refrains from using coarse language but continues to address her main topics such as being a single woman who was cheated on, women’s independence, raising children, etc. She has become an experienced comedian who excels in comedic timing and engaging with the live audience. However, since most of her routines in this season pose minimal challenges in terms of taboo humour, they are not discussed here.

Table 1 features Midge’s first performance. After Joel leaves her, she gets drunk and ends up at the Gaslight Café. Accidentally taking the stage, she begins venting her frustrations. The ST is presented in the left-hand column, while the dubbed Italian TT is displayed in the right-hand column. Relevant items are underlined and discussed afterwards.



Table 1.

Example 2. S01-E01

ST	TT
<p>Midge: (...) He left. Joel left. He packed up my suitcase and left (...). Couldn't get a clean <u>slate for one fucking day</u>. (...) [talking about her marital sexual life] I loved him. And I showed him I loved him.</p>	<p>È andato via. Joel. È andato via. Ha preparato la mia valigia e se n'è andato. Non posso avere una <u>cazzo di giornata tranquilla</u>. Io lo amavo e gli dimostravo che lo amavo.</p>
<p>Audience: Whoo! [WHISTLES]</p>	--
<p>Midge: All that <u>shit</u> they say about Jewish girls in the bedroom? Not true. There's <u>French whores</u> standing around the Marais district saying [faking a French accent] "Did you hear what Midge did to Joel's <u>balls</u> the other night? [PROLONGUED LAUGHTER] (...) I can't believe I am losing him for Penny Pan. That's her name. Terrible, right? Penny Pan [LAUGHTER] Penny Pan. [PROLONGUED LAUGHTER] Penny Pan. (...) [Talking about her breasts] Imagine coming home to THESE every night [PROLONGUED LAUGHTER, APPLAUSE] Yeah, they're pretty good, right? Plus, <u>they're</u> standing up on their own. [Midge shows her breasts; GASPS, APPLAUSE]</p>	<p><u>Stronzate</u> che dicono sulle ragazze ebreo in camera da letto? Non sono vere. Ci sono <u>puttane francesi</u> che girano per il quartiere di Marais e dicono: "Avete sentito che ha fatto Midge alle <u>palle</u> di Joel l'altra sera?... Non posso credere che lo sto perdendo per Penny Pan. Si chiama così. Terribile, vero? Penny Pan. Penny Pan. Penny Pan... Immaginate di tornare a casa da QUESTE ogni sera. Sì. Sono belle, giusto? E poi, <u>le ragazze</u> stanno ancora su da sole.</p>
<p>Sousie: <u>Shit</u>.</p>	Oh <u>merda!</u>
<p>Midge: Seriously, there's no <u>fucking way</u> that Penny Pan can compete with these <u>tits!</u></p>	<p>Sul serio, vi assicuro che è impossibile, <u>cazzo</u>, che Penny Pan possa competere con queste <u>tette!</u></p>

Midge's first performance

As can be noted, expressions containing "fucking" as an adjective were translated with equivalents aiming to convey their expressive force ("cazzo di giornata" and "cazzo" as an interjection). Similarly, all other expletives were retained into their equivalent terms ("whores" as "puttane", "balls" as "palle" and "tits" as "tette"). Susie's swearing in this and other instances is not added to the calculation mentioned above as it is not part of Midge's routines. Nonetheless, this and other expletives in other examples below confirm that coarse language is consistently retained throughout the series. This excerpt contains



an example of ‘creative addition’. While in the ST Midge refers to her breasts as “they”, in the Italian TT they are rephrased as “le ragazze” (the girls), arguably making the comedian’s line funnier.

Stereotypical ideas about Jewish people, particularly Jewish girls, are humorously exploited here. According to Midge’s personal experience, contrary to common beliefs, they can be much more daring when it comes to sexual intercourse. Like Midge’s set, the audience’s reactions and comments are scripted, probably to fulfil the intentions of the scriptwriter. While not all reactions can be fully documented, the audiovisual format effectively captures the attempt to simulate naturally occurring interactions.

Jewish humour is also part of Midge’s many acts, as also shown in Table 2. However, she cleverly intertwines it with the fear of a nuclear war stemming from tensions between the USA and Russia at that time. In this instance, Midge’s humour targets Jewish families and mothers.

Table 2.

Example 3. S02-E03

ST	TT
<p>Midge: I want to get serious here for a minute, people. Nuclear war. The nightmare, the horror. Oh, now, I’m not talking about dying in one. I’m talking about surviving and living in an underground bunker with your extended family until the radiation disperses. Mr. Khrushchev, have you met my family? If you’re gonna hit us, comrade, <u>fucking</u> obliterate us. [LAUGHS] (...) In my purse, there’s a government pamphlet I read on this with guidelines. One was not to bring anything into the fallout shelter that would be unnaturally disturbing. You realize what that means. Hundreds of radioactive, Jewish mothers above ground, roaming the streets of the Upper West Side. [LAUGHS] If that’s not a deterrent for nuclear war, I don’t know what is. [LAUGHS]</p>	<p>Voglio fare la serie qui per un minuto. La Guerra nucleare. L’incubo, l’orrore. Non parlo di morire, eh.. Parlo di sopravvivere in un bunker sotterraneo con la vostra famiglia allargata finché le radiazioni non si disperdono. Signor Khrushchev, ha conosciuto la mia famiglia? Se vuole colpirci, compagno, ci spazi via subito, <u>cazzo</u>... Nella mia borsa c’è un opuscolo a riguardo, con delle linee guida. Una era di non portare niente nel rifugio antiatomico di innaturalmente fastidioso. Capite che significa. Centinaia di madri ebrae radioattive in superficie che vagano per le strade dell’Upper West Side. Se questo non è un deterrente per la Guerra nucleare, non so cosa lo sia.</p>

Midge’s routine on the nuclear war



Again, “fucking” as an adjective was transferred as and interjection “cazzo”, but placed at the end of the sentence, most likely for emphasis. The reference to Nikita Khrushchev (the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964) was retained as it is internationally known. This routine is longer and only one part could be presented here. However, Midge skilfully exploits well-known biases about extended families, including in-laws and mothers (be they Jewish or not) to win her audience. These are typical topics in observational humour, which have been and continue to be successful in stand-up comedy nowadays.

The series frequently addresses the difficulties of performing in front of an audience that is predominantly hostile or uninterested in female comedians. Examples 4 and 5 demonstrate how Midge navigates both situations. In Example 4, she is at a club hoping to perform, but the owner Bob consistently favours male comics. When Susie locks one of the comedians out of the club, Midge seizes the opportunity to take the stage and poke fun at comedians whose routines centre around tired themes related to marital relationships and misconceptions about women.

Table 3.

Example 4. S04-E02

ST	TT
Bob: He just got back from a world tour, if we call the world Scranton. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Everybody’s favourite, except for that wife of his... Billy Jones! [CHEERING AND APPLAUSE; Billy does not appear onstage] Where are you, Billy?	Appena tornato da un giro del mondo, se per mondo intendiamo Scranton. Tutti lo amano, a parte la sua <u>povera</u> moglie! Billy Jones! Dove sei, Billy? Billy Jones...
Midge: Thank you, thank you.	Grazie, grazie.
Man 1: Come on, Billy!	Vai, Billy!
Woman: Yeah, Billy!	--
Man 2: Is this Billy?	<u>Ha cambiato sesso?</u>
Midge: Whew!	Uhhh
Man 3: Wheres’ Billy?	Dov’è Billy? Dov’è Billy?
Midge: Rough week. Women, huh? You can’t live with ‘em, you can’t. Well, that pretty much sums it up. You can’t live with ‘em. [WOMAN LAUGHS, Midge points a finger at the audience in agreement] Huh? My wife. Oh, brother. She saw a psychic who told her that in a past life, she was Mary, Queen of Scots. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I said, “Well, hope you had a good	Settimana pesante. Donne, eh? Non puoi conviverci e... no, non c’è altro da aggiungere. Non puoi conviverci. Eh.. mia moglie. Oh, cavolo, una sensitiva che in una vita passata era Maria, regina di Scozia. Ho detto: “Spero ti sia divertita perché in questa vita sarai <u>Maria, regina di scrofa!</u> ”



time, honey, ‘cause in this life, you’re <u>Mary, Clean My Socks.</u> ” My wife is...	
Man 1: <u>What the hell?</u>	Ma chi è questa? Ma dai!!
Midge: She says she wants a job.	Mia moglie dice di volere un lavoro.
Man 2: <u>You think this is funny?</u>	Basta, non sei divertente!
--	Man 3: <u>Rivoglio i miei soldi.</u>
Midge: I say to her, “Sweetie, you got two jobs already that you never show up for: <u>hand and blow.</u> ” [WOMEN LAUGH MEN GRUMGLE, BOO] I dedicate that one to my man Bobby.	Midge: Ci credereste? Le ho detto: “Tesoro, hai già due lavori che non svolgi quasi mai: <u>di mano e di bocca.</u> ” Questa la dedico al mio amico Bobby!
--	Man 4: <u>Ma dai!!</u> [Oh, come on!]
Bob: Cut her mic! Cut the spotlight - and get her off the stage.	Chiudetela il microfono. Spegnete le luci. Portala giù dal palco.
Midge: I got to go. Hey, why is it that my wife always wants to talk to me during the ball game?	Devo andare... Perché mia moglie mi parla durante le partite?
Susie: Oh, <u>shit.</u>	Susie: Ah, <u>merda.</u>
Midge: It’s like, honey, if I wanted you to ruin something enjoyable, I’d take you to the bedroom. [WOMEN LAUGH]	Le dico: “Tesoro, se devi rovinarmi un momento piacevole, ti porto in camera.” OK, va bene.
Woman: Come on.	--
Susie: Come on! You didn’t bump Birnbaum. You didn’t bump Borden. <u>What the fuck is wrong with you?</u>	Ehi, non hai cacciato Birnbaum. Non hai cacciato Borden. <u>Ma che cazzo ti prende?</u>
Bob: (to Billy) Get up and do your act, Billy.	Fai il tuo numero, Billy.
Billy: She just did it!	Lo ha già fatto lei!
Midge: But better. And in heels! [LAUGHS]	Ma meglio. E coi tacchi!

Midge is evicted from a club

In this excerpt, it is worth noting that the Italian dubbing team has added “povera” (poor) when Bob talks about Billy Jones’s wife, which emphasises Bob’s teasing on of Billy Jones. Similarly, the Italian dubbing team replaced one of the men in the audience’s question “Is this Billy?” with the more provocative “Ha cambiato sesso?” (Has he changed gender?). The first instance of artificial substitution by intensification in Midge’s routine is “Maria, regina delle scrofe” (lit. Mary, queen of sows, but figuratively meaning queen of sluts) instead of “Mary, clean my socks” in the source text (ST). Midge accompanies this punchline with a pelvic movement that mimics male sexual intercourse. While many women laugh, men feel offended and comment disapprovingly. In the TT, these comments are emphasised: “What the hell?” becomes “Ma chi è questa? Ma dai!!” (Who’s this one? Ohh come on!), “You think this is funny?” is replaced by “Basta, non sei divertente” (Stop, you aren’t funny). The added comment “Rivoglio i miei soldi” (I want my money back)



further shows the men’s discontent. Cinematic aspects such as camera angle and the dimmed lighting of the scene facilitate these technical manipulations of the text (Díaz-Cintas, 2012), as well as the fact that dubbing involves the complete deletion of the original soundtrack.

Midge’s vulgar reference to sexual intercourse and oral sex “hand and blow” is transferred as “mano e bocca” (hand and mouth). This equivalence can be understood since, in Italian, oral sex is perceived based on the body part involved (mouth) rather than the action (blow). As previously noted, all instances of Susie’s swearing are faithfully rendered.

The passage in Example 5 is extracted from a scene in which Midge is acting as both host and supporting act at a strip club. Lenny Bruce sits among the audience with other acquaintances, intentionally testing Midge to observe her response.

Table 4.

Example 5. S04-E03

ST	TT
Midge: Hello there, not many ladies and many gentlemen. I’m Mrs. Maisel, your host and guide for the evening. [Lenny Bruce and his friends applaud].	Allora come va? Vedo poche donzelle e molti gentiluomini. Sono la signora Maisel, la vostra presentatrice e guida di questa sera.
Man: Bravo.	- -
Midge: This is a very weird job I have. I’m a woman who comes out here to make men laugh who are here to see women take their clothes off. [Whistles] Easier job for a man. [Lenny throws an empty pack of cigarettes at her]	Faccio un lavoro molto strano. Salgo sul palco per far ridere uomini che vogliono solo vedere delle donne che si spogliano. È più facile per un uomo.
Man: Yeah!	[Indistinct shouting]
Midge: (...) [Lenny and his friends keep throwing small objects at her] And what am I supposed to talk about in between strippers, huh? Baseball? Kittens? Grandparents? [Lenny and his friends still throwing small objects at her] I mean, how do you keep a starving man’s interest when you’re performing between a chocolate doughnut and a cheeseburger? [More objects are thrown at Midge, but she keeps her composure, and men laugh] Not that you’re all paying attention to me. See these guys right here? These guys are ignoring me and just talking to each other. What are they talking	Di cosa dovrei parlare tra un numero di spogliarello e l’altro, eh? Baseball? Gattini? Nonni? Insomma, cosa si tiene vivo l’interesse di un uomo tra una ciambella al cioccolato e un cheeseburger? Non che voi prestate attenzione a me. Vedete questi signori qui? Questi signori mi stanno ignorando e continuano a parlare tra di loro. Di cosa parleranno? Di argomenti di cui parlereste anche voi. Riesco a sentirli, perciò vi riferisco la conversazione. “Sai cosa c’è di peggio che restare imbottigliati nel traffico quando <u>ti scappa da pisciare</u> ? Il fatto che



about? Just the stuff you'd expect at a joint like this. I can hear them, [going closer and whispering] so let me recreate the conversation. "You know what I hate worse than being stuck in traffic when you got to to piss real bad? The fact that Aristotle relied so much on opinions based on non-scientific reasoning." "I disagree. I believe a person can reason perfectly well in circumstances where we cannot claim to have scientific understanding, so I defend the philosopher Aristotle." "Jesus Christ, you and your fucking Aristotle. It's Aristotle this and Aristotle that." [LAUGHTER] "You know, he bugged young boys." [LAUGHTER] "It was a different time, don't you know. You can't apply modern standards to ancient figures." Sidebar. "Gee, Miriam Maisel, how do you even know all this stuff about Aristotle? You seem very girly with your pretty makeup and your fashionable hairstyle and your Park Avenue heels." And I say, "Well, my father would read Aristotle to me as a child, and I absorbed facts about the old fart even though I don't know what the fuck any of it fucking means." [LAUGHTER, CHEERING] [Looking at the men who realise people are laughing at them] Didn't mean to interrupt. Thank you! See you in a few.

Aristotele si fidasse di opinioni basate sul ragionamento non scientifico." "Non sono d'accordo. Per me si può ragionare perfettamente anche quando non ci si basa su conoscenze riscontrate scientificamente. Dunque, difendo Aristotele." "Cristo Santo! Tu e quel cazzo di Aristotele. Aristotele qua. Aristotele là. Lo sai che si faceva i ragazzini, vero?" "Ma quelli erano altri tempi. Le regole di oggi sono diverse da quelle del passato. Tra parentesi, "Miriam Maisel, come sai tutte queste cose su Aristotele sai? Sei così femminile, con quel trucco, l'acconciatura alla moda e ai tacchi di Park Avenue?" E io dico: "Papà mi leggeva Aristotele da bambina e ho assimilato tutti i suoi concetti, anche se non capisco un cazzo di quello che dice." Non vi volevo interrompere, grazie. Ci vediamo tra poco.

Midge performing at a strip club

Despite disruptions from Lenny and his friends, Midge remains composed and continues her performance. In fact, she draws inspiration from the lack of attention given to her by three men in the audience. The camera pans on these three men while Midge is in the background, yet she remains the focal point and appears to overhear their conversation. This evolves into a comedic act where Midge humorously targets both the three men and Aristotle. She ridicules the men's disrespectful behaviour and Aristotle for his theories and sexual preferences. Additionally, Midge satirises biased notions that suggest attractive women cannot be intellectually proficient enough to discuss philosophy. Eventually, the entire audience, including Lenny and his friends, responds with laughter, applause, and appreciation for Midge's performance, thus affirming her ability to captivate and engage them.

In this case, although certain audience reactions are clearly evident in the ST, they



were either excluded or rendered incomprehensible in the TT. The use of “cazzo di” for “fucking” is again favoured over other options, while “fuck” is conveyed as its equivalent “cazzo”. However, two instances of expletives were omitted (specifically “concepts about the old fart” translated as “i suoi concetti”, his concepts, and “it fucking means” translated as “quello che dice”, what he says). The most noteworthy alteration is Midge’s vulgar expression “he buggered boys,” which was toned down to “si faceva i ragazzini” (he did young boys).

5. Conclusions

The study has attempted to address the gap in understanding the differences between real and fictional stand-up comedy, a topic that has received limited scholarly attention thus far. It discusses Midge’s routines in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, illustrating how this form of performative art can engage in debates on social, political, and taboo topics through an observational lens. The show portrays Midge’s life on and off stage in 1950s and 1960s America, highlighting the challenges faced by a female comedian striving for stardom, drawing inspiration from Joan Rivers’s life and career. While many aspects of real and fictional stand-up overlap, some elements are exaggerated for comedic effect, such as Midge’s ex-in-laws hijacking her performance. The use of foul language is common in present stand-up comedy; however, during the depicted era, it was not only banned from formal events and TV programs but also subject to censorship enforced by the police, as evidenced by instances in which Midge and Lenny Bruce are arrested for indecency.

Regarding the Italian dubbed version of the series, the analysis indicates a tendency for reduced ideological manipulation, with a high percentage of swearing retained in the translation. Omitted items were compensated for with creative additions by the Italian dubbing team, arguably to maintain the original humour. Even though the study hints at the consistent retention of expletives by other characters, such as Susie, these findings are limited to Midge’s onstage performances. Therefore, a need for a broader analysis of coarse language throughout the series is advocated. Additionally, it may be worth investigating whether the Italian subtitled version handles swearing similarly to the dubbed version or differs in its approach. Finally, it should also be borne in mind that *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*, like other popular shows, is currently streamed online. Therefore, it is not subject to watershed regulations. However, comparative analyses between shows featured on streaming platforms and traditional broadcasters may yield different and interesting results.



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