Dave Allen’s stand-up monologues: An epidemiological approach

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1. Introduction

Human beings store millions of mental representations in their minds. A portion of them gets communicated to other human beings and acquire a certain stability, that is, a version of these representations can be found, with more or less faithfulness, in the mind of every member of a specific human group or community. These are cultural representations, relatively stable representations which can get communicated epidemiologically either vertically through generations (e.g. myths) or horizontally across a population (e.g. currently fashionable clothes).

In this essay it will be argued that, in the specific context of the stand-up comedy performance, the monologues by the Irish comedian Dave Allen play an important role in how the audience shape the state of these cultural representations and in the ‘cultural’ quality that certain representations acquire. Basically, the article explores several dichotomies which help us picture cultural transmission as a process which involves an epidemiological spread throughout a human group or, specifically, through the smaller-size context of the audience in the comedy venue.

Stand-up comedy performances like Dave Allen’s are a good example of public production (defined by Sperber 1996: 99 as “perceptible modifications of the environment brought about by human behaviour”) in which the mental representations of the individuals who are in the audience are contrasted with the assumptions communicated by the comedian’s public representations (cf. the dichotomy mental/public below), and whose outcome is only partly predictable. The spread of cultural representations involves a mental-public interface just like the one originated in these performances: “mental representations caused by public productions can in turn cause further public productions, that can cause further mental representations, etc. There is, therefore, a complex causal chain by which mental representations and public productions alternate” (Sperber, ibid.).

Causal chains of cultural transmission are affected by several factors, both psychological (e.g. a motivation to communicate the content of the cultural representations) and ecological (e.g. the existence of institutions engaged in transmission, see Sperber, 1997a). Neither seems to threaten cultural transmission within stand-up comedy performances. On the one hand, the members of the audience are psychologically motivated to attend Dave Allen’s performances (which they know are going to deal with lifestyle issues in humorous terms) and are ready to test their own view of the world against Allen’s. On the other hand, the ritualized activity of attending his stand-up performances provides an effort-saving environment for the transmission of cultural representations (see Yus, 2002, 2004). Among other background representations in the audience, there are some expectations related precisely to how the performance proceeds and what amount of interaction (if any) is permitted between Allen and his audience. These will be outlined briefly below.

2. Background expectations

When we talk about culture, we refer to relatively stable representations which can be found in the minds of most of the members of a community. In the context of stand-up comedy, some of these representations concern how this type of performance is supposed to be carried out. Stand-up comedy involves specific rules and practices to be followed, which belong to the comedian’s
and the audience’s background expectations stored through ritualized repetition:

A. Venue
Rutter (1997: 53f) referred to the physical aspects of the comedy venue as *spatial variables*, whose importance in the eventual enjoyment of stand-up comedy should not be dismissed. Among them, we can list the following:

1. Besides theatres, stand-up comedy is normally performed in a pub in Britain and in a nightclub in the United States.
2. There is often a minimal space between the comedian’s area and the audience’s.
3. The microphone is normally the only stage prop during the performance.
4. Seating is a matter of first-come-first-served. This has a levelling effect on the audience (no seats are more expensive than others).
5. Often the audience sit around tables in a pub-like fashion: “groups will not only share watching the comedy, but discussion, laughter, buying rounds of drinks, comment on performance and the taxi fare home. Sitting around a table rather than in the rows of a theater auditorium allows and encourages this” (Rutter, ibid.: 72).

B. Comedian
Comedians normally have control of the performance and what topics their monologues address. The audience is aware of this power, and expects that, at some stage during the performance, they may be addressed individually and even insulted by the comedian. In this sense, exchanges of insults are common in comedy routines.

C. Audience
The audience also exerts some power over the comedian: people attend a performance expecting to be amused, “to get their money’s worth”, and this fact puts pressure on the comedian to guarantee a humorous outcome. Stand-up comedians acknowledge the fact that a good ‘feeling’ from the audience is essential for a humorous outcome:

(1) When the audience is good, they seem good. When they are bad, they seem very bad... I guess if you have group leaders in the audiences that lead group laughter, it’s a big help. If I know three tables love me in a club, I can almost guarantee I can get the whole audience (Woody Allen, quoted in Wilde, 2000: 23).

(2) The greatest thing that a performer can have if he’s going to be successful, is an empathy with the audience. They *have* to like him. And if they like the performer, then you’ve got eighty percent of it made. And if you don’t have that, it’s damned difficult to get the audience on your side. If they resent you or if they don’t feel empathy with you or they can’t relate to you, as a human being, it gets awfully difficult to get laughs (Johnny Carson, quoted in Wilde, ibid.: 156).

(3) To me, really good comedy is a dialogue -it’s not a monologue. Their laughs are as important as what I’m saying. Laughs contain thought, you know. There are different shapes and sizes and sounds and colors and each one says something. So that’s the audience’s part, and then I say my part (Jerry Seinfeld, quoted in Wilde, ibid.: 336).

One possible way of checking the audience’s background attitudes and expectations is to ask questions or make statements followed by a call for agreement. This is important, since the
comedian “must establish for the audience that the group is homogeneous, a community” (Mintz, 1985: 78). Allen does check this homogeneity in his performances:

(4) [To the audience] Any parents here? [audience replies “yes!!”] Do your children use the telephone? [audience replies “yes!!”] Have they... at any time ever... once in all their lives... said to you “Daddy... mummy... can I pay for that call?” [audience laughs] Little bastards! You spend your life with this! And eventually they grow up... and they leave home (...) Into the world they go... the phone will ring... it’s them reversing the charges! [audience laughs] Not to find out how you are... but whether there are any calls for them!! (Allen, 1998).

Other, more subtle expectations concern the age and the sex of the comedian. The cultural archetype of male-and-adult comedian affects how those who do not comply with these qualities are received on stage. For instance, one of the keys to Tricia Storie’s humour lies precisely in her stereotype-inconsistent age, which she exploits extensively in her performances:

(5) I just turned 13 Friday. Mom says my body’s changing. She wants to give me ‘the Talk’. You know, the one about the birds and the bees. Although I don’t really think I need that because my mom is pregnant, and between the vomiting and the mood swings... I think I’d rather just shoot the birds and squash the bees (quoted in Carlin, 1997).

Similarly, women on stage produce a completely different reaction in the audience, as the comediennes themselves acknowledge (cf. Yus, 2002):

(6) Being a woman, right away you walk out to almost total rejection. Almost nobody wants you to be a female comic and they give you a lot of static just because of your sex. It’s almost the same as they don’t want a female President. There’s an old cave-age saying: “Keep women in their place -in the cave- back in the cave with a spoon in their hand”. Men have this silly, witchy, witchcrafty attitude that a woman who is a comic has lost her femininity (Phyllis Diller, quoted in Wilde, 2000:207).

(7) It takes a certain audacity for a woman to go on stage and say, right, listen to me and look at me; I’m going to make you laugh (Helen Lederer, quoted in Goodman, 1992: 294).

(8) Men in the audience treat female comics differently, too; they’ll take less from you, particularly anything of a sexual nature. It makes them cringe where it wouldn’t if it was a bloke saying it (Deirdre O’Kane, quoted in Fay, 2000).

D. Humorous strategies
In this paper our main interest is Dave Allen’s stand-up monologues, many of which seem to lack a number of the overt humorous strategies which are used extensively in traditional jokes (e.g. incongruity-resolution patterns, punning associations, etc., cf. Attardo, 1994, and Yus, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2004, among others, for discussion). Allen’s main humorous effects seem to arise, precisely, from the realization of the extent and quality of certain cultural representations, as will be outlined below. This is also the case of other comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld. Needless to say, many stand-up comedians do resort to typical jokes in their shows (some of these shows are sometimes a mere chained succession of jokes). Dave Allen himself uses typical jokes like the one quoted in (9) embedded in larger monologues:
I was in a restaurant and on the menu it said “goose”. I haven’t tried goose for many years, so I said to the waiter: “how’s the goose?”. He said: “I don’t know, I didn’t ask him” \textit{[audience laughs]}. “No!”, I said, “what’s it \textit{like}!”... “Like a white duck, only bigger” (Allen, 1996).

However, the main source of humorous effects in Allen’s monologues usually lies in other strategies. One of these, a highly innovative one, is centred on the contradiction between a “scientific” input in the first part of the monologue, and its final absurd conclusion, as in the following example:

Skin is an interesting subject. You know that we all shed skin? You know that? (...) Over an hour, each and every one of us sheds something like 10,000 minute scales of skin. Over a three-day period we shed one total layer of skin. This is a fact (...) You know that something like 90 per cent of the dust in the world is made up from dead human skin? How do you \textit{feel} about that? \textit{[audience laughs]} You think you’re dusting your home... You’re \textit{not}! You’re just moving your grand-mother around! \textit{[audience laughs]} (Allen, 1998).

Below we will provide a cognitive account of Allen’s monologues based on a number of dichotomies which help us understand why these monologues entertain the audience despite the fact that they often lack the humorous strategies used in other types of humorous discourse such as short jokes.

3. Dichotomies

3.1. Mental versus public

This dichotomy refers to types of representations which have already been mentioned in passing. Undoubtedly, there is a mental and a public quality to cultural representations but the actual term \textit{culture} is defined differently within several disciplines. Broad definitions include Lumnsden and Wilson’s (1983, quoted in Langrish 1999): “Human cultures consist of artifacts, such as knives of a certain shape and function; behaviors, such as initiation rites of a particular form; and mental constructions having little or no direct correspondence to reality such as myths”.

There is currently a heated-up debate on what we can label “cultural”. Within an epidemiological point of view, cultural representations are mental entities which disseminate from person to person (see Morris \textit{et al}., 2000: 6; Blackmore, 2001). But other analysts extend “the cultural” to non-mental items (Aunger, 2001: 4), as it happens with Cloak’s (1975) famous duality of \textit{i-culture} (mental cultural units) and \textit{m-culture} (public manifestation of these units). In-between we can place the \textit{memetic} approach to culture (more on this below). An example is Dawkins’ definition of “meme”, which shifts between the “mental-only” and the “mental-and public” approach to the scope of the meme as the unit of culture. As reported by Gatherer (1999), there is a substantial change between Dawkins’ idea of “cultural representation” in his 1976 and 1982 books (\textit{Dawkins A} and \textit{Dawkins B} respectively in the quote below):

\textit{Dawkins A}: ‘..a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.’ (Dawkins, 1976: 206); ‘Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches’ (Dawkins, 1976: 206); ‘Popular songs and stiletto heels are examples. Others, such as the Jewish religious laws...’ (Dawkins, 1976: 209);
‘Perhaps we could regard an organised church, with its architecture, rituals, laws, music, art and written tradition, as a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes’ (Dawkins 1976: 212); ‘Memes for blind faith have their own ruthless ways of propagating themselves’ (Dawkins, 1976: 213).

*Dawkins B:* (referring to the original Dawkins A definition, above) ‘...I was insufficiently clear about the distinction between the meme itself, as replicator, on the one hand, and its ‘phenotypic effects’ or ‘meme products’ on the other. A meme should be regarded as a unit of information residing in a brain... It has a definite structure, realized in whatever physical medium the brain uses for storing information... I would want to regard it as physically residing in the brain’. (Dawkins, 1982: 109); ‘The phenotypic effects of a meme may be in the form of words, music, visual images, styles of clothes, facial or hand gestures...’ (Dawkins, 1982: 109).

In this essay *culture* will be defined as a set of representations which resemble their mental counterparts and which can spread to other people due to their material (i.e., public) quality:

Most representations are found in only one individual, but some get communicated, transformed by the communicator into public representations and re-transformed by the audience into mental representations. Some even get communicated repeatedly, spread out in a human population and may end up being instantiated in every member of the population for several generations. (...) Each member of the group has, in his or her head, millions of mental representations, some short-lived, others stored in long-term memory and constituting the individual’s ‘knowledge’. Of these mental representations, some -a very small proportion- get communicated repeatedly, and end up being distributed throughout the group, and thus have a mental version in most of its members. When we speak of *cultural representations*, we have in mind -or should have in mind- such widely distributed, lasting representations (Sperber, 1996: 25, 33).

Therefore, there are mental and public representations which have to be analysed together in order to account for cultural spread: the former being inside people’s heads (e.g. beliefs, likes, intentions), and the latter being transmittable material versions (e.g. utterances, written texts, pictures). Both are involved in cultural transmission, unlike some traditional studies which tended to treat culture as either private knowledge or public phenomena with little or no interface between them (cf. Morris et al., 2000:6; Auger, 1999).4 Broadly speaking, the process of communication between Dave Allen and his audience involves mental representations (Allen’s thoughts) turned into public representations (Allen’s words) and re-transformed as mental representations (audience’s thoughts).

3.2. Individual versus mutually manifest

One of the requirements of cultural spread is that within a certain social group every member in it has a similar mental version of the cultural item. On paper, we should be able to say that within the specific context of the comedy venue, every member of the audience shares the same cultural representations once Dave Allen makes them publicly available during the performance. A number of theorists and researchers argue that one of the basic goals of communication is to establish shared knowledge or understanding (see Lyons and Kashima, 2001, for a general review). For instance, Clark (1996) suggests the term *common ground*, which is defined as the part of knowledge which both parties in communication believe that they share. However, this
statement is quite controversial, since one can only make predictions about those assumptions which are really shared, apart from the problem of infinite regress that the term sharing provokes (A believes that p; B believes that A believes that p; A believes that B believes that A believes that p, ad infinitum).

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1990, 1995) claim that people only have access to manifest information, and are never sure of how much information they actually share. In a specific context, people have cognitive environments made up of all the facts that are manifest to them. These authors define manifestness as follows:

A fact is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95: 39).

The fact that manifest information is inferrable or perceptible does not mean that it will necessarily be entertained or processed, only that it may be. For example, in situation (11a), all the assumptions in (11b-e) are manifest to Tom, but he will probably process only the first two (which are highly manifest, that is, highly likely to be entertained by Tom, whereas the second two are weakly manifest):

(11) a. [Tom hears the doorbell].
   b. The doorbell has just rung.
   c. There is someone at the door.
   d. The electricity is not turned off.
   e. The person at the door is tall enough to reach the bell.

The audience members in the comedy venue also have their own individual cognitive environments made up of all the assumptions that are manifest to them in that specific context. A part of these manifest assumptions comes precisely from the linguistic input from Dave Allen’s words. There is, then, what is called a mutual cognitive environment which includes, among other assumptions, the ones made highly manifest by Allen’s words (these assumptions turn into mutually manifest assumptions). Undoubtedly, the fact that the people in the audience are aware of this mutuality in their simultaneous access to information is, itself, highly manifest. Dave Allen, for his part, has to predict which information will cross-cut the audience’s cognitive environments, that is, which part of the individual cognitive environments of the members of the audience is mutual, and also which cognitive resources they have at hand to extract the most relevant outcome from his words. Besides, Allen will normally predict which information is likely to interact in such a way with this environment that new strengthened cultural assumptions may spread throughout his audience. In Koziski’s (1984:57) words, “many stand-up comedians jar their audience’s sensibilities by making individuals experience a shock of recognition. This occurs as deeply-held popular beliefs about themselves -even the hidden underpinnings of their culture- are brought to an audience’s level of conscious awareness”.

In this sense, one problem that comedians face is that they often over- or under-estimate the extent of these cognitive environments and fail to produce the intended response in the audience: “speakers sometimes over-estimate the shareability of their idiosyncratic representation of a particular state of affairs and hence produce a message that is not interpretable within the shared background knowledge” (Lau et al., 2001: 361).

Many humorous effects are derived simply from the fact that individually held assumptions about what culture is like are strengthened and made mutually manifest during the performance. For instance, this enjoyment of cultural strengthening is typical of British humour,
very prone to self-parody: “we seem instinctively to laugh at anything which depicts a caricature of our own routines -hence the bewildering success of totally unfunny sit-coms. In sit-com, the comic things can be unwashed socks or brightly coloured clothes; these recognisable details have become funny because they anticipate a minor domestic farce in which we will see ourselves reflected” (Bracewell, 1994: 6). Imagine, for instance, a typical situation like the one depicted by Allen in (12) and (13) below, with which some members of the audience may be familiar. Their humorous effects arise precisely from the public realization of the mutual manifestness regarding these experiences, a mutuality which spreads in the audience (acquiring an immediate ‘communal’ status in the audience, that is, becoming collective representations):

(12) Have you ever sat in a bar..., at a table..., two or three chairs around it? Somebody is bound to come and say: “Are... are you... sitting in that chair?”... “No, I’m sitting in this one”. “What I mean... is anybody sitting in that chair?”... “Yes, there are eight people having a gang-bang!” [audience laughs] (...) Have you ever sat, say, in a park... on a newspaper?... sit on a bench...? it’s wet... put a newspaper there... sit there...? I guarantee you... I guarantee you... after five minutes... in two minutes a guy will come and say: “Are... are you... are you reading that?” [audience laughs]. “Yes! I have an eye in my anus!!” [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

(13) I got my first pair of glasses. Do you know the most amazing thing about getting your first pair of glasses? As soon as you get your first pair of glasses, your bloody memory goes! [audience laughs] I put my glasses on... take them off... In this second I have no idea where they are! [audience laughs] I’m walking around like a dickhead!... “Where!... Where are my glasses?” [audience laughs] I spend half of my life... my diminishing years... looking for my bloody glasses! [audience laughs]. I write myself little notes now... “Your glasses are in the mantelshelf”... I find the note... I cannot read it!... I haven’t got my bloody glasses! [audience laughs] (Allen, 1998).

Therefore, much of the enjoyment in Dave Allen’s stand-up performances comes from the individual/mutually manifest interface. Laughter triggers a realization in the audience that mental representations previously thought to be personal are, in fact, public, manifest to all the audience.5 The immediate effect is a new cultural status for Allen’s public representations which are turned “mutually manifest” to the audience. Consider, for instance, his monologues regarding Christmas in (14-16):

(14) Christmas is becoming much more stressful. (...) I don’t bring my Christmas tree into the house until Christmas Eve. The lights work perfect... looks beautiful... Two hours before the shops close... every little bastard light goes out!! [audience laughs] Now, for the next two hours I am scampering like a lunatic around London, like a demented lunatic in ever increasing circles, searching madly for one little green Christmas tree light that was made in Taiwan in 1966 [audience laughs]. (...) What is this lunacy with Christmas trees? (...) Can you imagine... that any other time of the year... if you brought a tree into the house... silver balls on it... and a fairy on the top? They’d put you away! [audience laughs] Actually, this year, to ensure that I got a good Christmas tree this year, I went and picked it earlier. It looked perfect, beautiful shape... wonderful, wonderful shape... dark green... thick... bushy. That was then [audience laughs]. Now it looks like it suffers from acid rain. Even the fairy on the top is losing its hair! [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

(15) If it’s difficult to get a Christmas tree, it’s even more difficult to get rid of the bloody
thing! [audience laughs] (...) The dustman won’t take it... You can’t burn it... (...) And you find yourself... creeping around your neighbourhood trying to find a builder’s skip [audience laughs], and you can’t find one, so you dump it in somebody’s garden [audience laughs]... and think “Thank Christ! Got rid of it!”... Come back to your own house and there’s two Christmas trees there! [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996). 

(16) To me, the most annoying thing about Christmas is wrapping paper. Why can’t the manufacturers of wrapping paper make wrapping paper so large that I can wrap up two presents...? Why is it always one and a half? [audience laughs] I’ve actually got to the point that I buy the presents to fit the paper. I buy a big present... and a small present [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

The members of the audience who privately went through similar experiences with Christmas will enjoy the mutual manifestness which Dave Allen’s monologues provide in the venue. A direct effect is the widely cultural quality that these experiences with Christmas acquire after being narrated by Allen in his show.

The enjoyment of mutual manifestness is also applicable to not fully propositional impressions, and which the audience may have felt privately at some stage of their lives, but did not assess them consciously, let alone reflect on them as possibly mutually manifest until they were encouraged to do so by Dave Allen’s words (cf. Ross, 1998: 108; McIlvenny et al., 1993: 239). Imagine, for instance, that several members of the audience have experienced the negative feeling of losing their memory due to aging. This apparently private feeling was made mutually manifest to the audience in one of Allen’s monologues:

(17) Extraordinary thing... memory. Quite recently (...) I’m in my house. I’m downstairs in my house. There is something that I want which is upstairs. I know what it is and I know exactly where it is upstairs. And I leave the sitting-room... and walk across the corridor... go three steps up the stairs... and now I have no idea what it was that I was looking for! [audience laughs]. So I think “Well, reason this through... don’t go up and look for something that you don’t know you’re looking for. Sit down on the stairs... work your way back to the point when you thought what it was you wanted”. In two minutes I have no bloody idea whether I was upstairs coming down or downstairs going up! [audience laughs] (Allen, 1998).

Koziski (1984: 59, 61) suggests a similar view: “it’s interesting to study the comedic response as a vehicle for making visible to an audience tacit areas of unacknowledged human attitudes and behaviors, residing in private, unofficial realms (...) The audience may hear their own behavior described as if it is an alien culture in the sense that they knew that information all along but no one ever said it like that to them before. However, even though the comedian and his audience share culture, part of the cultural knowledge with which they operate is tacit (that is, hitherto unspoken)”. Mutual manifestness of these representations and impressions is indeed a major source of humour inside the physical environment of the performance. In comedian Jack Dee’s words, “humour is [sic] to do with the realisation and relief that someone else has recognised something that you do or think” (quoted in Bracewell, 1994: 6).

3.3. Strengthening versus challenging

From the last dichotomy we can conclude that one of the positive effects of the interaction between Dave Allen’s public representations (monologues) and the audience’s background
knowledge (mental representations) is the strengthening of cultural representations and the shift of representations from private storage to the manifestly collective and cultural. Besides, we can also address the challenging of the audience’s cultural representations, also relevant and attempted by many comedians and comedienennes especially against enduring cultural stereotypes (see Yus, 2001, 2002 on the spread of sexual stereotypes in British comics and stand-up comedy, respectively). Allen’s performances also challenge unfair cultural stereotypes, as in the monologue quoted below:

(18) If, for example, working on the assumption that one day we’ll have a nice hot summer... go into my garden... and I like the Sun... I decide to strip naked, and lie in my garden naked... and my next-door neighbor, female, looks out of her window and sees my nakedness (...), she can actually phone the police and have me arrested for indecent exposure. Can you imagine that happen to you? Your career is wiped out! The company... “God, I didn’t know he was like that!” [audience laughs] Your wife would wander around and the neighbors would say “Poor darling, my God! Imagine, me married to a beast like that!” [audience laughs]. Your children would get harassed in school! [mimics children talking] “Daad is a flaasher!” [audience laughs]. And if she goes to her garden and lies naked in the Sun and I look at her nakedness, she can phone the police and have me arrested for being a peeping Tom!! [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

A typical variety of comedy in which challenging is frequent is the so-called feminist comedy, defined by Goodman (1992: 289) as “that comedy which purposefully subverts stereotype-consistent expectations about ‘what women are’ or ‘should be’, and which also subverts the very means of expression and representation by and through which such expectations are conveyed”. Comedienne Victoria Wood goes as far as to claim that there can be no stand-up comedy unless it involves criticism, “otherwise what are you talking about? You’re not saying anything. You can’t say anything funny unless it’s a criticism. It’s got to be negative in some way, even though it can be couched in quite a jolly way. You can’t say anything positive in comedy at all” (quoted in Sweeting, 1994). However, Victoria Wood can indeed be placed among those comedians who, like Dave Allen, base their performances on making the audience aware of the collective quality of some of their thoughts, including enduring stereotypes:

It’s something that everybody knows happens, but nobody talks about. [Victoria Wood] always manages to be extraordinarily ordinary. She’ll never just talk about a biscuit; she’ll talk about a Rich Tea. A generic name will never do where there’s a specific, and with the specific comes a whole lot of associations. The audience nods the whole time. It’s quite unique to hold a mirror up to ordinary life and make it so special (Geoff Posner, quoted in Rampton, 1996).

Another comedian who bases his performances on this ‘joy of mutual manifestness’ in strengthening the collective side of background representations is Jack Dee:

[Jack] Dee’s humour relies on observed detail from that microcosm of England he brings to life. Details like crappy pictures of penny farthings made out of clock parts, dysfunctional London Underground chocolate machines (“I’m the kind of person who thinks maybe, just this once, it’ll work”), ticket collectors... “It’s a very British kind of humour”, Dee concedes. “We have a great tradition of not complaining, and it’s this frustration I tap into. When you rant and rave about British Rail on stage, you sense people are not only laughing, they’re clenching their fists. Mockery is indeed a fine form
of revenge” (Dunn, 1994).

In-between strengthening and challenging we can find other relevant strategies used by the stand-up comedian which can turn out to be entertaining for the audience: “cut out a piece of society for the inspection of his audience [and] set up a frame within which image and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and perhaps remodeled” (Victor Turner, 1977, quoted in Koziski, 1984: 60). One of them is the situation in which the comedian refines or improves the audience’s knowledge about a certain cultural item. For instance, Dave Allen reminds the people in the audience how illogically they interact linguistically with their surrounding world:

(19) The English are the most illogical nation in the world. And you’re guided by the most illogical notices in the world. For example, in this theatre here tonight, the audience that are here are informed by the management that when you leave here, you must leave by the exit, only [audience laughs]. Now, I’m Irish, I don’t have to be told that... [audience laughs] “The solid wall gap”... I go for the gap [audience laughs]. (...) I actually saw once a door which said “this door is not an exit” [mimics puzzlement] [audience laughs]. (...) I saw in Manchester, on the outside of a door, a notice which actually said “this door is neither an exit nor an entrance, and must be kept closed at all times” [audience laughs]. Why don’t you brick the bloody thing up and forget about it? [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

(20) When I see things like “part-time females required”... What’s a part-time female? [audience laughs] I saw once a notice recently which said “Are you illiterate? Are you unable to read and write? So, contact us at this address”...[audience laughs] I’ve actually seen, by the river Thames, a sign which says “this area is liable to flooding. If this notice is covered, do not park your car here” [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

(21) It’s extraordinary, in a way... when you pick up something which is purely alcohol... and say to somebody... “good health!” [audience laughs]... When you actually think of the properties of alcohol... the damage it does to you... it destroys your brain cells... gives you enormous headaches... double vision... destroys your stomach life, your kidney, your liver... and we say... “good health!” [audience laughs]... we say “cheers!”,”good health!”,”long life!”,”happiness!”... [audience laughs] We should be actually saying “misery!!” “short life!!” [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

(22) I live near a graveyard which actually has a sign which says: “Do not use the footpath to the crematorium. It is for patrons only” [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

Mintz (1985: 147) also refers to this cultural re-shaping when he emphasizes the inherent creative distortion of stand-up comedy, which is “achieved through exaggeration, stylization, incongruous context, and burlesque (treating that which is usually respected disrespectfully and vice versa). These and other techniques all disrupt expectation and reorder it plausibly but differently from its original state” (see also Greenbaum, 1999: 38-41; Ross, 1998: 108; McIlvenny et al., 1993: 239). Comedian Johnny Carson’s words in (23) and comedian Jerry Seinfeld’s in (24) are also illustrative:

(23) You can take a very common situation and your point of view or your attitude toward it and what you see in it may be completely different from what somebody else sees in it.
They will comment on it one way, you may take a completely different approach to it, and this is where humor comes out - your specific look at something the audience hasn’t thought of (quoted in Wilde, 2000: 169).

(24) [M]y comedy is... to pick things apart. To look at something that seems so trivial in life. Like I do this thing about cotton balls and how women need thousands and yet men don’t seem to need any. I mean what are they? And, I’ll get more into that than I could “my girlfriend” or some subject like that - that a lot of people would find attractive as a subject, but somehow doesn’t attract me... I get interested in the type of faucets that they use at the airport in the sinks, and wondering how much milk you have in the refrigerator and the little interrogation that you go through if you live with someone. “Who had the milk last?” And “What time did you get up?” And “Whose milk was that?” Those little things in life... that’s what I like to get in there (quoted in Wilde, ibid.: 338).

3.4. Intuitive versus reflective

Sperber (1996: 89ss, 1997b) defined these two types of mental representations (specifically beliefs) which are stored differently in people’s minds: intuitive and reflective. This distinction gives an interesting tool with which to measure the effect which Dave Allen’s monologues have on the audience (cf. also the dichotomy “private versus metarepresented cultural” below).

Intuitive beliefs are typically acquired via spontaneous inference or perception, forming a reliable and often schematic picture of the world. They tend to be simple and often exhibit cross-cultural validity. Since they provide a trustworthy description of the surrounding world, they tend to be rather rigidly held unless strong evidence leads to their rejection.

On the other hand, reflective beliefs are metarepresentational in the sense that in order to be stored they require some validating context, that is, they are rationally held in virtue of their validating source. Their construction is normally based on the authority of the source of their content, for instance parents or teachers, whose credence activates the reflective belief even if the representation itself is not fully understood. Therefore communication from a trusted source is basic for their construction. For instance, in Sperber (1996: 88) we find the following illustration: A teacher says to a pupil called Lisa that there are male and female plants. She does not quite understand these concepts, but she does know that animals and humans have this sexual duality. The teacher’s authority in these matters is enough for her to believe (reflectively) that there are sexes in plants, even though this is only a half-understood idea. In other words, the intuitive belief in (25a) below provides a validating context for the embedded reflective representation of what the teacher says in (25b):

(25)  a. What the teacher says is true.
    b. The teacher says that there are male and female plants.

Similarly, authority is also essential in Dave Allen’s stand-up performances, since “stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision” (Greenbaum, 1999: 33). The comedians themselves are aware of the role which authority plays in the world of stand-up comedy:

(26) If an audience feels superior to you, then you’re in trouble... If you can pretend they are superior. There’s a difference there. If an audience feels superior to you, they can be rude. They don’t even turn around to watch you. If they feel equal to you, then you’re in good shape. (...) [T]he audience must trust you and you have to be able to lead them by the
hand. Once you can lead them by the hand, you can take them through any avenue of comedy. You can take them on a very serious subject and they will go with you. All of a sudden you hit them with a block-busting punch line... but they must trust you. (Joey Bishop, quoted in Wilde, 2000: 103, 113).

(27) [For anyone to learn to be a comedian one needs] [a]n enjoyment of being a leader and taking them where you want ‘em to go. You’re the troop leader, the scout master. Enjoyment of being set apart, being up there instead of one of them. You gotta recognize that. It’s an egoistic thrill. You’ve gotta have a very strong, healthy ego. Sometimes it’s a very strong, sick ego that drives people... then you get a different kind of humor (Phyllis Diller, quoted in Wilde, ibid.: 221).

(28) I can just look down and there’s X amount of people that’s frightened of me... I just wink and that makes them laugh. It’s amazing the effect power has on people (Dick Gregory, quoted in Wilde, ibid.: 253).

(29) [W]hen you’re on a stage, people look up at you and up to you. There’s a presence of superiority in talking down to people, instead of being on the level, on the floor... (George Jessel, quoted in Wilde, ibid.: 290).

Some of the sources of authority for the formation of reflective beliefs are parents, education, and the mass media. Dave Allen joked about the first of these sources in one of his shows, specifically the influence of parents on the formation of stereotype-consistent representations of sex roles in society:

(30) One of the main changes in today’s society is our attitude to what we could call the stereotype of the sexes... or the role that sex plays. If you actually think back to your childhood... We had very distinctive lives... My mother was a great believer in what we could call sexual differences. I was four years of age... I would walk with my mother down the street... my mother would say things like “David, walk on the outside”. I’d go “What do you mean?”. “Walk on the outside of me”. “Why mummy”?”. “It leaves your sword arm free” [audience laughs]. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a sword!” [audience laughs]. “No, but in the days, years ago, when men did have swords, some men might want to attack the female, so the male would walk on the outside of the female so he can get out his sword and fight that person... See? That’s why you walk on the outside”. “But... but... I don’t have a sword!” [audience laughs]. “No! But you protect mummy!!... You protect!!... male!!... you’re a male!! You’re the stronger of the two!! Males are the hunters! The providers! Females stay at home, and make a home and a nest and keep it warm for the... [mimics the mother hitting her son] Stop crying!!” [audience laughs] (Allen, 1996).

Reflective beliefs are intimately linked to the human ability to metarepresent one’s own and other people’s intentions, attitudes and beliefs. It should be noted that reflective beliefs can be turned into intuitive beliefs if their source leads to people’s acceptance of the belief and to an incorporation to their factual knowledge. In Sperber’s (1997b) words,

Rather than arriving at [certain] intuitive beliefs (...) by means of your own perceptions and inferences, you might have arrived at them via communication. Someone you trust might tell you any of [them]. You would then disquote the content of the communication
from the belief that it has been communicated and believe this content directly. Communication plays here, to some extent, the role of experience by proxy. You might yourself have formed such beliefs via perception and spontaneous inference, had you been placed in a position to experience their perceptual basis.

For instance, if TV viewers constantly listen to the weatherman saying that it is unlikely that it will rain in Alicante the next day since it is a very dry area of Spain, viewers may disquote the source of the reflective belief \( \text{(the weatherman says that it hardly ever rains in Alicante)} \) and start believing it as their own intuitive belief \( \text{(I believe that it hardly ever rains in Alicante)} \), probably forgetting where they first acquired that belief.

Unlike animals, human beings have this metarepresentational ability to interpret any expression-token as representing another expression-token which it resembles in relevant respects (see Sperber, 2000). Since utterances are public representations, they are typical objects of mental representation. Metarepresentation types in stand-up comedy include thoughts about thoughts, utterances about thoughts, thoughts about utterances, and utterances about utterances, as exemplified in (31a-d) below (cf. Wilson, 1999):

\[
\begin{align*}
(31) & \quad a. \quad \text{Dave Allen thinks: “Some members of the audience want me to talk about sexual relationships”}. \\
& \quad b. \quad \text{Dave Allen says to a member of the audience: “I believe you are clever”}. \\
& \quad c. \quad \text{Dave Allen thinks: “That member of the audience says that he dislikes my show”}. \\
& \quad d. \quad \text{Dave Allen says to the audience: “My brother says that it rains a lot in England”}. 
\end{align*}
\]

Basic metarepresentations can be embedded in higher-level metarepresentations (second-order, third-order..., and this embedding may involve very complex inferential operations which animals, given their rudimentary means of communication, are unable to achieve. In this essay, a basic metarepresentational operation by the members of the audience refers to attributing to a specific community a certain collective belief, which may match, contradict, or overlap with their privately held beliefs. The fact that one can hold parallel beliefs on the same cultural item will be stressed as one major medium through which cultural stereotypes can spread epidemiologically in a community (more on this below).

3.5. Duplication versus transformation

There is no doubt that cultural representations are transmitted and spread through a population and that communication is one basic method of transmission. Throughout this essay it is hypothesized that within Dave Allen’s stand-up performances this is precisely what happens to the cultural representations made manifest in his monologues, and that much of the audience’s enjoyment of humour comes from a mutual awareness of the underlined cultural status of some representations. However, there is currently some debate concerning the state of representations during this process of transmission. Here we will briefly focus on two proposals: the duplication-centred memetic stance and the transformation-based epidemiology of representations. To these a third eclectic possibility will be added, which views cultural transmission as a hybrid of these two views.

A. The memetic stance

This approach to culture was first suggested by Dawkins (1976, 1982) and recently brought back into fashion by Blackmore (1996, 1998, 1999, 2001). Basically, memetics advocates a view in which cultural representations duplicate in the process of transmission, as can be deduced from
the following quotes:

Imitation is distinguished from contagion, individual learning and various kinds of non-imitative social learning such as stimulus enhancement, local enhancement and goal emulation. True imitation is extremely rare in animals other than humans, except for birdsong and dolphin vocalisation, suggesting that they can have few or no memes. I argue that more complex human cognitive processes, such as language, reading, scientific research and so on, all build in some way on the ability to imitate, and therefore all these processes are, or can be, memetic. When we are clear about the nature of imitation, it is obvious what does and does not count as a meme. I suggest that we stick to defining the meme as that which is passed on by imitation (Blackmore, 1998).

The whole point of memes is to see them as information being copied in an evolutionary process (...) Given the complexities of human life, information can be copied in myriad ways. (...) The information in this article counts as memes when it is inside my head or yours, when it is in my computer or on the journal pages, or when it is speeding across the world in wires or bouncing off satellites, because in any of these forms it is potentially available for copying (Blackmore, 2001).

It is not very clear what the scope of the term meme is. In the bibliography we can find debates on whether memes are public cultural items or only the representations in peoples’ minds or both (the genotype/phenotype debate). On other occasions, broad scopes are suggested for the term, which lower its theoretical validity (cf. Gardner, 2000; Wilkins 1998; Rose 1998).

B. The epidemiology of representations
Supported by authors such as Sperber (1984, 1996), the epidemiological stance favours a different picture in which imitation is viewed as a limiting case, rather than the norm. Cultural representations do maintain a certain degree of stability when transmitted from person to person, but communication inevitably involves an interaction between the new input and the person’s individual background knowledge, and the resulting effect is only partly predictable.6

The main aim of an epidemiology of representations is “to explain macro-phenomena as the cumulative effect of two types of micro-mechanisms: individual mechanisms that bring about the information and transformation of mental representations, and inter-individual mechanisms that, through alterations of the environment, bring about the transmission of representations” (Sperber 1996: 50). This is clearly applicable to stand-up comedy performances such as Dave Allen’s, in which individual and inter-individual mechanisms interact in the eventual spread of representations inside the comedy venue. A causal chain is created in which Allen has mental representations which are turned into public representations which modify the physical environment of the venue (e.g. they are highly manifest to the audience). The members of the audience, by virtue of this modification, may also want to store and construct their own mental representations, and perhaps modify the environment again later on by means of their public representations, provoking a chained spread of more or less similar versions of the representations.

Given this interaction between in-coming information and the addressees’ background knowledge, it is very unlikely that the memetic view can account for this cultural transmission effectively. Even though stability of representations is also pointed out as necessary for optimal cultural spread from the epidemiological view, duplication is a limiting case and transformation is the most common effect of people’s cognitive handling of representations.
C. Neither duplication nor mutation, but in-between

Several researchers have claimed that cultural transmission can be studied as a complex interface of some items which are duplicated, in the memetic sense, and other items which are transformed in the chained process of transmission, a sort of hybrid picture of cultural dissemination.

To start with, even within the two models outlined above there is acknowledgement that the process of transmission may not be as strictly duplicating (memetics) or as strictly mutating (epidemiology) as they pictured:

In the memetic stance, the possibility of no strict duplication in the process of transmission was also acknowledged, to a greater or lesser extent (cf. Aunger, 2001; Wilkins, 1998). Dawkins (1982), for instance, wrote:

> The copying process is probably much less precise than in the case of genes: there may be a certain ‘mutational’ element in every copying event (...). Memes may partially blend with each other in a way that genes do not. New ‘mutations’ may be ‘directed’ rather than random with respect to evolutionary trends. (...) These differences may prove sufficient to render the analogy with genetic natural selection worthless or even positively misleading. My own feeling is that its main value may lie not so much in helping us to understand human culture as in sharpening our perception of genetic natural selection.

Similarly, Aunger (1999) acknowledges the possibility of no exact duplication within the memetic point of view:

> If one allows that memes can be present in artifacts, then memes such as ink on paper can be replicated with very high fidelity: using photocopiers, we have direct replicator-replicator reproduction, and consequently no loss of information. However, many memetic replication cycles seem to involve stages of translation from one form to another, and hence some information leakage. In particular, more ‘traditional’ memetic life cycles involve brains. If a meme must pass through someone’s head, the general inability of bits of brain to duplicate themselves directly means that they must travel between hosts to replicate. But to do this, they must be translated into another form for social transmission -for example, as bits of speech- since bits of brain don't themselves make the journey from one head to another.

Also within the epidemiological approach there is some acknowledgement that some information does get duplicated in the process of transmission. In Sperber’s (1996) notion of public representation, he seems to predict an optimal state of faithfulness in the way versions inhabit the minds of the collectivity: “public representations are generally attributed similar meanings by their producers and their users... Similarity across people makes it possible to abstract from the individual differences and to describe ‘the language’ or ‘the culture’ of a community” (ibid.: 81).

Besides, the existence of cultural stereotypes seems to focus on the fact that some cultural representations rely heavily on a conventional, non-mutating relationship between the mental and the public version. Similarly, Downes (2002) proposes an interesting three-level model of cultural transmission which includes both duplication and mutation of representations. On level 1, the representations are ‘thoughts’. These are selected by becoming the most relevant to modular beliefs in the widest range of contexts of other beliefs. The public phase consists of intentional communication governed by the principle of (optimal) relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995), in which the representations are inferentially reconstructed as the informative intent of the speaker. This level fits the epidemiological stance. On level 2, the representations are
linguistic; the coded relationship between the logical entry for a concept and the lexical item. Logical forms are unenriched or undeveloped and require inferential development into a propositional form. Crucially, there is no one-to-one relationship between the logical forms coded into linguistic types and the propositions they can be used to inferentially convey in a context. There are thus at least two inferentially related levels of mental representation, and then lexical expression. That means that lexical items are independently selected by their statistical utility in the inferential expression of propositions. Concepts and their coded lexical counterparts that are favoured by this statistical utility exactly reproduce and have spread to a cultural level without any ‘semantic change’ in sense, thus fitting the memetic view of cultural duplication. Finally, on level 3, the level of cultural artefacts, there is a ‘normative’ relation to mental representations. This is cultural knowledge associated by convention with the item. Level-3 items, like level 2 items, being, conventions, also reproduce with a high level of accuracy.

3.6. Private representations versus metarepresented cultural representations

In order to understand what really occurs in the minds of the audience during Dave Allen’s stand-up performances, it is interesting to distinguish between the representations which the members of the audience consider their own intuitively or reflectively acquired thoughts (e.g. private beliefs), and those which they regard as belonging to a community (e.g. cultural beliefs), and which may match, contradict, overlap with, or complement each other. The latter require metarepresentational storage in the form “in this culture/community it is believed that \( p \)”, whereas the former are stored directly as factual representations in the form “I believe that \( p \)”.

Needless to say, the distinction is valid only for methodological purposes in explaining cultural spread, because both (reflective) private beliefs and cultural beliefs are metarepresentational, and require a validating context for their support. But in my opinion the distinction is useful to explain different responses from different mental arrangements of the audience in stand-up comedy performances (see Yus, 2002, 2004).

The ability to have parallel representations of the same referent, one regarded private and the other ascribed to a culture, is an interesting human capacity which improves interaction with the environment. In Pilkington (2000: 112f) we find the following example:

(32) Richard is a gorilla.
(33) a. Gorillas are fierce, nasty, prone to violence.
    b. Gorillas are shy, sensitive creatures, given to bouts of sentimentality.

This metaphor relies on cultural stereotypes regarding the gorilla’s behaviour in (33a) which are then mapped interpretively onto Richard’s own attributes. However, an ethologist may well have reached a different conclusion intuitively, after a direct observation of gorillas, for instance (33b). Even so, the ethologist will still understand (33a) when hearing (32). The explanation of this dual-access, parallel view of the behaviour of gorillas lies in the method of mental storage, direct and factual in (33b), that is, directly grasped from observation, and metarepresentationally stored following a schema such as “it is believed in this culture/society that \( p \)” in (33a). Cultural stereotypes such as the qualities in (33a) are normally salient to a whole community, becoming what is usually called a collective representation attributed to a whole social group (Sperber 1996: 35) and need not be erased when a person privately constructs parallel but differing beliefs about the same referent.

To sum up, we can distinguish the following background representations in the audience when they attend a stand-up comedy performance:

1. Private representations (e.g. beliefs), which people assume as part of their background
knowledge and which, in the case of individual beliefs, can be sub-divided into:

1.a. **Intuitive beliefs**, acquired spontaneously via perception or inference.

1.b. **Reflective beliefs**, metarepresented beliefs whose validating context is usually made available through communication and a source of authority. Two major sources for the formation of reflective beliefs are parents and school, on the one hand, and the constant barrage of information reaching the person from the media, on the other.

2. **Metarepresented cultural beliefs**, also reflective, but which may differ drastically from the holder’s *private* representations, as was illustrated in examples (32) and (33) above. For instance, concerning sex roles in society (Yus, 2002) two members of the same audience will differ in their mental representations if one of them *privately* acquired the belief that men and women should have equal opportunities in society (stereotype-inconsistent belief), but was nevertheless aware of the *cultural* sex-role stereotypes that abound in the media, and the other member was brought up to consider women’s role in society inferior to men’s and whose stereotype-consistent *private* beliefs were strengthened by *cultural* stereotypes reaching that person from multiple mass media discourses.

Dave Allen’s prediction of the audience’s arrangement of this multiplicity of beliefs is important, but the interpretation of the outcome of contrasting his monologues and the audience’s background knowledge is not fully predictable. What *can* be hypothesised is that many of these “old information-new information interfaces” will produce a reinforcement, a questioning, or at least a mutual awareness of the existence of cultural stereotypes.

In a preliminary analysis of how cultural stereotypes spread, these types of background representations in the audience yield a typology of possibilities depending on how Dave Allen’s monologues might affect them. Broadly speaking, we can differentiate *stereotype-consistent information* (representations which clearly refer to pervasive and enduring social stereotypes) from *stereotype-inconsistent information* (not conforming to this stereotypical cultural information). In all cases, metarepresented cultural beliefs (reaching the audience especially from the media and sexist education) can be considered *stereotype-consistent*, given the quantity of stereotypical assumptions which acquire a representational status in the audience’s minds through public media discourse (press, tv, films, comics, magazines...) and traditional upbringing, but the possibility of stereotype-inconsistent cultural metarepresentations from media discourses is not denied either. The result is the eight-case typology reproduced in Table 1, the first four based on stereotype-consistent input from the comedian, and cases five to eight focused on stereotype-inconsistent input.

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Table 1. Interaction between the comedian’s stereotype-(in)consistent information and the audience’s background representations.

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To illustrate the categories proposed, examples of typical cultural archetypes can be suggested. For instance, in Yus (2002) this typology was applied to sex-role stereotypes with the following examples of cultural representations:

A. *Comedian’s monologue*: stereotype-consistent in cases 1-4 (*all women should be housewives*) and stereotype-inconsistent in cases 5-8 (*women play an active role in cross-sex relationships*).

B. *Private representations in the audience*: either stereotype-consistent (*all women should be housewives* in cases 1-4; *women play a passive role in cross-sex relationships* in cases 5-8), or stereotype-inconsistent (*women should be whatever they want to be* in cases 1-4; *women play an active role in cross-sex relationships* in cases 5-8).

C. *Metarepresented cultural representations in the audience*: mainly stereotype-consistent (*all women should be housewives* in cases 1-4 or *women play the passive role in cross-sex relationships* in cases 5-8) as portrayed repeatedly in media discourse (see Yus, 2001: ch. 3 for a general review). Again, the possibility of stereotype-inconsistent information from media discourse is not dealt with, given the vast amount of stereotypical information in these discourses, but this possibility is not denied either.

An example of Allen’s stereotype-inconsistent monologue to illustrate cases 5-8 in Table 1 is provided below:

(34) Women are much more independent nowadays and I’m very pleased with that. They are much more aware of their own sex. They’re not quite so prepared to play the subservient role to the hairy macho that existed. You remember them? I mean... there was a time when girls would wait for the initial advance from the male, which generally came up when the pubs had closed... [*audience laughs*] in between yawns... and belches [*audience laughs*]. Their bodies were subjected to a kind of groping, fumbling attack! [*audience laughs*] (...) In a way, there is a role reversal taking place. Women are much more, as we say, independent... more prepared to go out... and pick up somebody. If they fancy some fellow they don’t sit on the other side of the room and wait for some kind of magical thing to happen... They are always quite prepared to go across and pass a compliment... (...) They are much more direct about sex and what sex is for them... and quite rightly. I mean, women will talk about... *orgasms*, “my own right to have an orgasm”... “I’m not
your sexual play thing... I want! I want! You had it last night, it’s my turn tonight!” [audience laughs]. And the male now... doesn’t know how to react on this! He was the hunter!... now he’s the hunted! He doesn’t know what he can do in the foreplay! He doesn’t know what to do with it! And she goes “I want an orgasm!!!” [audience laughs]. (...) The male... retreats! Basically, females are now talking about [mimics being a woman speaking] “Are we gonna make love? Are you just gonna lie there? He suddenly goes [mimics the man’s answer] “I... haven’t taken any precautions” [audience laughs]. (...) He says things he’d never said before...”I’ve... got a headache” [audience laughs]. And she’ll say “I’ve got something to cure that!” [audience laughs]. There’s a total turnaround now in male and female sexual relationships! The male is actually faking the orgasms!! [audience laughs](Allen, 1996).

The representations made manifest by monologue (34) interact with the audience’s private and cultural representations, and the outcome of this interaction of representations -the shape and extent of their cultural spread- depends on the quality of this individual storage of representations. Take, for instance, the first case in the typology (see Table 1). This is the one which most strongly favours the epidemiological spread of stereotype-consistent cultural representations. This fact is supported by the evidence that in the processes of transmission stereotypical information has a greater tendency to remain stable (and more likely to spread epidemiologically) than stereotype-inconsistent information. For instance, Lyons and Kashima (2001) observed that when their informants transmitted a story to others, the stereotype-consistent information contained in it was reproduced more often and more faithfully than the stereotype-inconsistent one, the latter progressively dying out as the chain of transmission proceeded. This first case also fits Douglas’s rite (1978, quoted in Mintz, 1985: 73), that is, a context in which shared cultural representations are publicly affirmed. In other situations, such as case seven in the typology, what takes place is a re-examination of these cultural representations (Douglas’s anti-rite).

The analysis of these eight cases also gives us evidence of why certain stereotype-consistent cultural representations continue to spread through generations. One possible explanation is the fact that when Dave Allen challenges stereotypical representations he has to refer to them even though this reference is only meant to acknowledge their unfair cultural status. Therefore, even if Allen’s stereotype-inconsistent monologue in (34) strengthens the audiences stereotype-inconsistent private beliefs, the audience is still capable of accessing, via their (parallel) metarepresented cultural storage, the stereotypes which Allen intends to subvert, thus adding indirectly to their manifestness in the comedy venue.

From Table 1, we deduce, in short, that in cases one, two, four and seven cultural stereotypes spread either because the comedian’s stereotype-consistent monologue strengthens them or leads to an elimination of contradictory stereotype-inconsistent representations (cases one, two and four) or because the audience’s private beliefs are also stereotype-consistent (seven). In cases three, five, six and eight cultural archetypes are challenged either by the strength of stereotype-inconsistent private beliefs in the audience (case three) or because, despite Allen’s challenging monologue (34), the cultural stereotype is activated anyhow in the necessary contrast between stereotype-consistent information and the new, in-coming stereotype-inconsistent monologue (five, six and eight). In other words, in cases five, six and eight the stereotype-consistent cultural representation challenged by Allen inevitably entails a confirmation of the existence of that background cultural rule which the comedian attempts to question.

4. Concluding remarks
The stand-up performances by Dave Allen are good examples of a context in which the audience’s cultural representations are affected (i.e., strengthened, contradicted, refined, complemented...) by the comedian’s monologues. These stories often lack the typical humorous strategies that are found in conventional jokes, and some of their effect is based on ‘the joy of mutual manifestness’, e.g. the realization of the cultural status of some thought-to-be-private representations. But the representations made manifest by Allen’s monologues interact individually with the mental arrangement of the members of the audience, which inevitably entails a transformation in the process of transmission. However, cultural representations do remain relatively stable in this process. Communal laughter in the comedy venue may serve as a levelling device within this specific arena of cultural spread.

Notes

1. This essay will focus on the Irish comedian Dave Allen. Anglo-Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney or Derek Mahon were a central object of research by Brian Hughes, but Ireland also offers other interesting sources of academic research, as it happens with stand-up comedians.

2. This spread does not occur in random fashion but, rather, in directions guided by interest and effort in the transmission. Cultural spread (a macro-mechanism), then, is not really different from everyday communicative interactions (micro-mechanisms) in which people’s search for relevance guides them in the right direction towards the intended interpretation of utterances (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Sperber, 1996: 53-54).


4. This distinction between mental and public can be compared to the distinction between genotype and phenotype. The former is the mental representation, while the latter is the implementation of it as behaviour, vocalisation or artifact (cf. Gabora, 1999, Blackmore, 2001). As pointed out above, Cloak (1975: 170) also makes an interesting distinction between i-culture (cultural items in people’s minds) and m-culture (material manifestations of cultural artifacts): “an i-culture builds and operates m-culture features whose ultimate function is to provide for the maintenance and propagation of the i-culture in a certain environment. And the m-culture features, in turn, environmentally affect the composition of the i-culture so as to maintain or increase their own capabilities for performing that function. As a result, each m-culture feature is shaped for its particular functions in that environment”.

5. A note of caution here: the fact that laughter spreads across the venue is no guarantee that Allen’s intended humorous effect has been achieved, let alone that cultural representations (made manifest by Allen) are similarly held in all the members of the audience. Often the audience laughs for no specific reason, maybe from the fact that they are in a place of entertainment, or they simply get carried away by other people’s laughter without really knowing why laughter arose in the first place. I would like to thank Salvatore Attardo (personal communication, March 24/25, 2002) for pointing this out to me.

6. The epidemiological analogy is clear: some cultural representations are transmitted through generations (the so-called traditions), which resemble endemics. Similarly, other cultural representations spread rapidly through a specific population (the so-called fashions), which resemble epidemics (Sperber 1996: 58). But there are differences too: “viruses spread by replication, and rarely undergo mutation. Representations, on the other hand, tend to be transformed each time they are transmitted. Reproduction of representations, if it ever occurs, is an exception” (ibid.).
7. “Everyday cognition relies heavily and uncritically upon culturally available schemata -knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information” (Dimaggio, 1997).

8. Gil-White (2004) also claims that there has to be a mixture of replication and mutation in cultural transmission and illustrates this claim with someone, called Bob, whose tennis serve is so good that it becomes “the model serve” that everybody tries to imitate:

Suppose Bob’s tennis serve is the most attractive, and watching Bob induces people to modify the information they have about their own tennis-serve. In principle, anything can result in the continuum bounded by the following two extremes: (a) Replication: people acquire information to reproduce Bob’s serve exactly; (b) Random Changes: people rewrite the information at their locus such that they produce behaviours typically bearing zero resemblance to Bob’s serve.

Neither the extreme of random changes nor that of replication (100% copying fidelity), allows accumulation of adaptive design. That occurs only in the middle, where descendant changes are relatively similar to the parent stimulus, but somewhat different. This can happen in two ways.

(1) Small copying mistakes, only once in a long while. Descendant copies are replicas of parent serves, with a tiny probability of replication failure. Rare random modifications typically make Bob’s serve less effective. Since only effective serves are attractive, most random changes produce less attractive serves. But very occasionally a random copying mistake begets a more effective -and therefore more attractive- serve, which then displaces Bob’s as people begin replicating the improved version. Many iterations of this cycle lead to ever better serves. This case is exactly parallel to genetics. Sperber (1996) claims that cultural transmission must be like this in order to allow cumulative adaptations. But let us take a look at a rather different process.

(2) Copying always involves mistakes, but closely hugging an average of perfect accuracy. Everybody’s goal is to copy Bob’s serve exactly, but there is always some error. Yet errors are relatively small, so that Bob’s serve remains the template for all descendant serves. From the modest variations introduced by copying errors, a serve superior to Bob’s emerges, and this becomes the new template for us all to imitate and thus the new mean of the population, with a cloud of error around it.

Works Cited


