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**Cultural Differences between the British and the American Version of the TV Series “The Office“**

Bachelor Thesis

Prague 2014

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**Kulturní rozdíly mezi britskou a americkou verzí  
televizního seriálu “The Office“**

Bakalářská práce

Praha 2014

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**Declaration:**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is completely my own work and that no other sources were used in the preparation of the thesis than those listed on the works cited page.

I agree with this bachelor thesis being made available for academic purposes.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank PhDr. Radek Vít, Ph.D. I am grateful for his guidance and professional advice on writing the thesis.

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to analyse cultural differences between the British and the American society on the basis of a British sitcom called “The Office” and its American adaptation. In the first chapter of the thesis we learn the basic information about the sitcom. In chapter two there is an explanation of how could the sitcom became so popular in the US. In the second part of the same chapter we look into general differences in filming the UK and the US sitcoms. With the third chapter the analysis of the sitcom “The Office” starts. It begins with a description of its plot-line and the main characters then it moves on to analyse differences between the main characters. After this, a topic of cultural and social phenomena in the present-day UK and US society is examined. The analysis ends with the discussion on the topic of humour and its differences in the UK and the US version of the sitcom.

## **Abstrakt**

Cílem této práce je provést analýzu kulturních rozdílů mezi britskou a americkou společnostmi na základě britského sitcomu “The Office“ a jeho americké adaptace. V první kapitole této práce se dozvídáme základní informace o tomto seriálu. Druhá kapitola se pokouší vysvětlit, jak se mohla stát americká verze tak populární. Druhá část této kapitoly zkoumá obecné rozdíly mezi točením britských a amerických sitcomů. Ve třetí kapitole začíná analýza samotného sitcomu, Nejdřív je zobrazen jednoduchý popis dějové linky a hlavních postav, potom práce přechází k analýze hlavních postav. Dalším tématem k analýze jsou kulturní a společenská témata soudobé Británie a Spojených států. Analýza je zakončena tématem, jak se liší humor v britské a americké verzi sitcomu.

## Introduction

According to statistical data, the number of American households owning a TV set was 96.7% in 2011 (Stelter, 2011). In the Czech Republic the percentage is very similar – in 2012, 96.3% households admitted having a TV set (Frantová, 2014). These figures tell us about the colossal significance this medium has gradually obtained in our society.

Television is now the most widespread medium around the world (alongside the Internet) and teachers should take it into account, especially the ones who teach languages. For them television can become most welcome help in the classrooms. They can use dialogues from popular films to illustrate the point when teaching grammar or to extend their students' range of vocabulary considerably, especially in the field of informal language where today's TV shows and films play an irreplaceable role. A considerable advantage of this approach is that students are far more likely to remember grammatical rules or new vocabulary when illustrated with these new and fashionable means rather than with standard exercises, and what is more, students can learn everything in completely natural pronunciation.

However, there is one more field television can be used for in classrooms and that is teaching students about the culture of other nations. In the case of teaching English, it is mainly the culture of the United States and the United Kingdom. By actively watching a film/TV series set in those countries, children can absorb the basic cultural patterns alongside its language and the story. As today's society is extremely open and it is easy to meet foreigners even in the most remote areas it can easily be argued that children should be at least to some extent aware of the cultural patterns and realities of other countries, starting with the countries whose language they study. And for this purpose films and TV shows can prove to be most helpful.

The aim of my thesis is to try and illustrate some of the crucial cultural differences between the United Kingdom and the United States using a TV sitcom called "The Office" for this purpose as this sitcom has quite a unique position among other TV shows. It was first filmed in the UK and after its huge success it was adapted for the screens of more than 88 countries. (Wells-Lassagne, 2012, p. 1) One of them was the

USA, where it soon became a hit. The key to its success was the fact that instead of simply copying the original, the makers decided to rewrite the show completely, so that it would truly reflect specific US reality, ways of behaviour, culture patterns, specifically American values and, last but not least, humour. This effort to thoroughly adapt the show for American screens makes it much easier consequently to compare the differences between the UK and the US show which otherwise could have been missed.

The main body of the thesis is divided into two sections. Section one, which is theoretical, consists of two chapters, and section two consists of three chapters. In the first chapter both versions of the sitcom will be properly introduced. The second chapter will deal with the most important differences in the process of making a sitcom in the UK and the US. In the third chapter specific differences between the main characters in the sitcom will be analysed in the view of their nationality. The fourth chapter will focus on contemporary cultural and social issues depicted in the sitcom. The fifth chapter will examine the question of humour and its differences between the UK and US version of “The Office”. All the topics will be examined with the assistance of professional literature and references to particular scenes in the British and the American version of “The Office”.

My analysis will be limited to the episodes of only the first two seasons of each version (plus the two-part Christmas Special in the UK version). There are several reasons for this limitation. Firstly, the UK version only consists of two seasons which means there would be no counterpart for the subsequent seven seasons of the US sitcom. Secondly, with the increasing number of episodes, the US version gradually becomes less and less realistic, which means it would no longer serve purposes of this thesis.

## **Chapter 1: Introducing “The Office”**

“The Office” is a sitcom<sup>1</sup> originally written and filmed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, depicting day-to-day lives of employees and their obnoxious boss in a paper

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<sup>1</sup> “A sitcom or 'situation comedy' is a genre of comedy performance in which recurring characters take part in humorous storylines centred on a common environment, such as a family home or workplace.

company in Slough – a depressing industrial town near London. One of the main plot lines revolves around the relationship of a receptionist named Dawn and an office worker called Tim. One of the main aims of the makers was to make the show look as real as possible. That is why they used an innovative filming technique called faux documentary or “mockumentary”<sup>2</sup>. Several of the key aspects of the show are documentary naturalism, the lack of catchphrases and of a laughter track.

The British version consists of two seasons with six episodes each plus a two-part Christmas Special after the second season. It first aired in July 2001 on BBC2. The ratings were not particularly good at first, with the first episode attracting only 1.4 million viewers, a figure which did not change much for the whole 1<sup>st</sup> season. (Beeden et al., 2011, p.4) However, the critical responses were universally warm or even enthusiastic and the show won several well respected comedy awards, such as the Best New TV Comedy Award in 2001 or the Best TV Comedy Award in 2002, even the Golden Globe Award in 2003. The number of viewers was gradually mounting, reaching its peak audience of 7.2 million for the first part of its Christmas Special after Season 2. (Walters, 2005, p. 51)

The US version of the sitcom was adapted for American screens by Greg Daniels, who was highly praised at that time for his work on “The Simpsons”. Instead of Slough near London, the sitcom was set in a Pennsylvanian town called Scranton. The first episode of the US remake aired in March 2005 on NBC TV Network, attracting 10.2 million viewers. (Griffin, 2008, p. 156) During the first season, the critical responses were mixed, but after a slow start the sitcom quickly became an enormous hit – in the end there were 9 seasons of the US adaptation of “The Office”, which meant the show ended only in 2013. The first season included only 6 episodes as its British counterpart did. However, in the next 8 seasons it followed a more traditional US TV-show airing pattern of 19 – 26 episodes per season. In 2006 the show won an Emmy for Outstanding Comedy. (Griffin, 2008, p. 157)

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Sitcoms were originally devised for the radio but today are found on television too.” (British Comedy Guide, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Faux documentary or mockumentary is a TV show which is filmed as if it was a documentary. The function of the style is to satirize the subject and to underline its plausibility.

The UK and the US versions of “The Office” differ in the topics they discuss or in the way they do it. However, the basics remain the same. They both strive to make the sitcom look as plausible as possible, by using the faux documentary technique. They both share the setting of a paper company, workplace atmosphere, character outlines and basic plotline. However, they both adjust all these constituents to the specific environment of their countries and they also differ in the discussed themes, so that they would reflect the ones which currently resonate most in their societies.

## **Chapter 2: Filming a sitcom**

### **I. How to make a good remake?**

As it has already been mentioned in the Introduction, there have been approximately 88 national remakes of “The Office”. The most likely explanation for the immense popularity of the series is the fact that the subject of this TV show is one of almost universal interest. In today’s society, a considerable number of people work in an office environment and therefore can closely relate to the situations depicted in the sitcom. Almost everyone has at least some experiences with an annoying boss, colleague or just general boredom of the office.

However, regardless of the universality of the topic, the success of every new national version of “The Office” is actually far from granted. There were numerous national adaptations which had to stop after or even before the first season ended. The most prominent of these is probably the French adaptation called “Le Bureau” which ended with poor ratings after the sixth episode. The main problem of the adaptation was the fact that instead of trying to interpret the sitcom so that it would reflect specifically French environment, values and issues resonating in the society, the makers simply translated the U.K. original into French and let French actors play it. It is clear why French viewers were not able to identify with the sitcom as it in fact spoke about someone else’s culture, not theirs. A good example of truly minimalistic changes to the original is French characters’ drinking champagne instead of beer which was used in the

UK version. (Wells-Lassagne, 2012, p. 95) Except for this, the adaptation remained extremely faithful to its UK counterpart.

The reason for the brief analysis of the French adaptation is to demonstrate that not every national adaptation can serve us well when we try to analyse culture-based differences between the original and a national adaptation. If the makers of the adaptation do not dare to go far enough in their pursuit of making the original look like reality in the new country, they can easily end up with a show played by native actors but depicting a foreign reality which is completely remote from the viewer.

The reason for the enormous success of the US adaptation was the fact that it adopted exactly the opposite approach to remaking the series than the French did. The makers were well aware that if the show was to be popular, they had to show the audience something they would be familiar with, ideally because they experienced it themselves in their everyday lives.

That means that after the very first episode of the US remake, which yet closely resembled the original, the American version started to explore a wide range of topics, relevant only in the US context. These topics will be discussed further on in my thesis, but first, there is one more issue, which has to be discussed and that is the differing approaches between the United Kingdom and the United States to filming TV shows and sitcoms in particular.

## **II. Differences between the British and the American sitcoms**

As it was already said, the key element of “The Office” is realism. The original makers of the show, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, wanted the series to look as real as possible, and that is mainly why they used the faux-documentary style when making it. As Ricky Gervais once said: “I think the realer you are, the more you connect on an emotional level.” (Walters, 2005, p.23)

In her book “Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour” Kate Fox, a highly respected English anthropologist, discusses quite a distinctive relationship of the English towards realism in the TV shows. She illustrates her point on the example of

English soap operas and the way in which they differ from soap operas in other countries. She says: “The plots, themes and storylines [of English soap operas] may be very similar [...] but only in England does all this take place entirely among ordinary, plain-looking, working-class people, often middle-aged or old, doing menial or boring jobs, wearing cheap clothes, eating beans and chips, drinking in scruffy pubs and living in realistically small, pokey, unglamorous houses.” (Fox, 2004, p.81) The fondness the English have for realism is truly one of their national traits. Fox attributes this to empiricism and realism, which are deeply rooted in the English psyche, and the specifically English qualities of down-to-earthiness and matter-of-factness. She also mentions the inherited distaste of the English for anything artificial or pretentious. (Fox, 2004, p. 81). This certainly does not mean that people from England are not capable of appreciating anything else than realistic TV shows, films or other forms of art. It rather means that if a scene in a film, a TV show or a sitcom is supposed to be perceived as reality, the audience is very sensitive about it really being that way.

The filming of TV shows and sitcoms in the USA usually follows quite different patterns from the British ones. Their main concern is not so much to be realistic and believable, but rather to engage their viewers on an emotional level – of course apart from trying to humour them, which is one of the given characteristics of the sitcom genre. We can see it on the example of the US sitcom “How I Met Your Mother”, which first aired in 2005, the same year as the American remake of “The Office” and which can be considered one of the typical contemporary American TV sitcoms.

First of all, there is the obvious fact that it ended only this year after Season Nine (208 episodes) – such a long running period is a typical trait of US sitcoms. This is in sharp contrast to British sitcoms, especially the contemporary ones, which usually have far fewer seasons. There is also a difference in the number of episodes per one season – while in the US it is approximately 22 episodes per season, in the UK, it is usually only six episodes per season. According to “British Comedy Guide” this can be attributed to the fact that unlike in America, sitcoms in the UK are usually written by just one or two people instead of a whole team of writers. What is more, fewer episodes per season mean lower risk investing in a new programme (British Comedy Guide, 2014) which can lead to a greater diversity among the British sitcoms.

One of the reasons why the sitcoms made in the US can last for so long and still be so popular is that the central topic they revolve around is primarily the relationships between the characters and their development. Passionate love, painful break-ups, beautiful weddings – the aim of all these features is to emotionally engage their viewers and make them want to see what happens next.

We can see another difference between the American and the British sitcoms in the main characters. According to Kate Fox, in the UK, there is a strong tradition of depicting the main characters as losers: “unsuccessful people, doing unglamorous jobs, having unsatisfactory relationships, living in, at best, dreary suburban houses. They are mostly working class or lower middle class, but even the more well-off characters are never successful high flyers.” (Fox, 2004, p. 82)

By contrast, the US sitcoms usually focus on quite different characters. For example, it is quite a common thing for these characters to climb the corporate ladder surprisingly quickly as the story develops. To use the example of the sitcom “How I Met Your Mother” once again – by the end of the Season 9 we can see all five main characters achieving their dream jobs and making a lot of money, naturally alongside having babies and travelling around the world.

Of course, there are also losers in American sitcoms, but they are still better class losers: they are usually less untidy, pessimistic or fed up with life than their English counterparts. (Fox, 2004, p. 90) Also, we usually sense that even if there is one part of their lives which is not particularly glamorous at the moment, they still are very successful people in other areas. For example, even if a woman in an American sitcom loses her job, it still does not take away her being thin, beautiful, well-tanned, made-up and living in a lovely and almost unbelievably tidy home.

This is also connected to the fact that the situations depicted in American sitcoms are almost never purely sad or depressing. They are usually smoothed by a joke or just the presence of the character’s best friends who are depicted as always being there for him/her no matter what. All of this is supposed to lighten up the mood and put the audience’s minds at ease. Rather cynically speaking, the makers have a very good

reason for these smoothing tendencies as there is a lot of money in the process of making a US sitcom and the maker always has to be sure not to alienate anybody.

All these points also explain why running “The Office” in the USA was such an extraordinary thing. For example, as Greg Daniels decided to stay as faithful as possible to the realistic format of the original, we can, rather untypically, watch a show without a laugh track – a device typical for American TV sitcoms, which effectively instructs the audience when it is appropriate to laugh, sigh or basically give any reaction to the ongoing situation on screens. The history of “canned laughter”, as the Americans call it, goes back to the 1950s when it was first used in a US sitcom “The Hank McCune Show”. (Glenn, 2000) Nowadays, it is used in almost all US sitcoms. We can find an interesting example of how the sitcom would look like without a laugh track on the website of the newspaper “The Huffington Post” which posted a scene from a famous US sitcom “The Friends” without a laugh track pointing out how incredibly creepy the show would become. (Luippold, 2014)

Canned laughter in the US sitcoms is used for many purposes, most importantly to ensure the audience understands the joke. However, its main purpose can also be seen in making the situations depicted less painful to watch, to lessen possible awkwardness or uneasiness of the scenes, in short, to make sure the show will not be too realistic or pessimistic because the audience would simply not watch it. Now we can see why the absence of a laugh track in the US version of “The Office” was so unusual, especially if we contrast it with the British environment where, because of their love of realism, the absence of a laugh track is not really an issue and many of the most brilliant British sitcoms do not have it, including “Peep Show”, “The Royal Family”, “The Inbetweeners” and many others.

Another revolutionary step taken by the American version of “The Office” was to stay faithful to its British counterpart in the physical appearance of its characters. As one of the main objectives of the show was to seem believable, we can, most unusually for US sitcoms, see an American main character who does not wear her make-up and is rather plain-looking, an accountant who is morbidly obese, a salesperson who is quite

unattractive and has a drinking problem, in short, people who can actually be your colleagues in an office.

However, even though there are many similarities between both versions and American writers tried to preserve as much from the character of the show as they could, they still had to make a great many adjustments too. These adjustments stem primarily from different national identities, concepts of humour and issues resonating within the society. Without adjusting to these new realities, the US sitcom could not have become nearly as popular as it have (remember for example the French *Le Bureau* which was mentioned earlier and which turned out to be a complete fiasco). That is why in the second part of my bachelor thesis the main task will be to point out the most striking differences in particular situations from both versions and to analyse them from a national perspective.

## **Chapter 3: Differences between the main characters**

### **I. The plot and main characters**

The storyline of the series is actually quite simple. We watch the everyday life of an office and its white-collar workers, although in some parts of the story we can see blue-collar workers and their working environment (in this case a warehouse) as well. The storyline is effectively divided into two parts. The first one focuses mainly on the boss of the office, his behaviour toward his subordinates and superiors and his various activities around the office. The other part is basically a love story between a receptionist and a salesman who have to overcome many obstacles (including the receptionist's fiancé) before they can finally end up together.

There are four main characters in both versions of "The Office". Let us start with the leading character – the boss. This 39-year-old man, whose name is David Brent in the British version and Michael Scott in its American counterpart, is an arrogant and obnoxious human being who craves the attention of everyone in the office. He

desperately wants his employees to see him as a great boss and a friend but because of his character, they usually do not. He is not all bad though and has some good qualities too, but these unfortunately surface only occasionally and rather inadvertently.

Tim Canterbury (or Jim Halpert in the US version) is one of company's paper sales representatives. He is intelligent, witty and well-liked. However, he is also frustrated with his work as he considers it pointless. What is more, he is in love with a receptionist.

Dawn Tinsley (UK)/Pam Beesley (US) works in the office as a receptionist. Apart from having feelings for Tim/Jim, she also has a fiancé Lee (UK)/Roy (US). They have been engaged for three years already but are still not married. She is fond of doing book illustrations and perceives her job to be only a temporary thing, before she can get a job closer to what she actually likes. However, from the context of the story we gather that she has actually been working in the office for many years.

Gareth Keenan (UK)/Dwight Schrute (US) is a salesman who sits at a desk next to Tim's/Jim's. His qualities make him quite difficult to be around as he completely lacks social skills. He often annoys his co-workers and mostly Tim/Jim, who repays him by constantly playing pranks on him. He is a person who craves influence and power, however limited it may be, and that is why he toadies to the boss all the time.

Each of the main characters draws our attention to different cultural phenomena of both countries, except for Gareth Keenan/Dwight Schrute whose qualities are essentially the same in the UK and the US version, only maybe more extreme in the latter. Therefore, it would not be beneficial to include him in the analysis, which leaves us with three characters for close examination.

## **II. Tim Canterbury/Jim Halpert**

Let us start with Tim Canterbury (UK)/Jim Halpert (US). It was already said that he is intelligent, witty and universally well-liked but also frustrated with his job and his boss. What we have not mentioned though is the extent to which his character differs according to his nationality. As he is the central character of the story many important

adjustments had to be made in the American version so that the audience could like him, identify with him or even only perceive him as a true American.

First of all, there is a substantial difference in his physical appearance between both versions. While Tim (UK) is rather short, plain-looking and lacking visible muscles his counterpart Jim (US) is tall, handsome, muscular – in short, manly-looking. It can be argued that one reason for making the main character more handsome can be simply the fact that American producers wanted to create an extra incentive for women in the audience to watch the show. More importantly, though, the differences in the main character's appearance in this case refer to more general differences between British and American cultural values. This is very well illustrated in two parallel episodes in season one, the British episode called "The Quiz" (s01e03) and its American counterpart called "Basketball" (s01e05). In their article about the articulations of national identity in TV adaptations, Alexandra Beeden and her colleague Joost de Bruin closely examined these two episodes and came up with very interesting findings. They claim that both episodes place the characters in competitive situations but both the situations differ according to each nation's popular culture. The British episode revolves around a trivia quiz in the local pub, where characters compete in teams. The pub quiz is considered something of a British institution, and the situation has its basis in verbal competition and mental ability, which can be seen as a form of cultural capital in Britain (Beeden, 2013, p. 11).

It is mainly this emphasis on mental abilities, intelligence and wit rather than on physical abilities what makes it possible in Britain to make somebody like Tim a main character. We can find much evidence of this in the sitcom where we gradually gather that Tim is a very intelligent, cultured, quick-witted man. For example, in Episode 3, Season 1, he mentions: "I'm into... I like ballet, I love the novels of Proust, I love the work of Alain Delon...", or in Episode 5, Season 1, he tells us about his plan to leave work and go back to university to study psychology. Also, we discover that one of the main reasons Dawn the receptionist likes him is his great sense of humour<sup>3</sup> which is an extremely important quality for the British.

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<sup>3</sup> This is based on Episode 6, Season 2 where Tim, Dawn, her fiancé Lee and others are hanging out in the common room (the original was shortened by the author):

On the other hand, different values are appreciated in American society as we can see from the episode “The Basketball”. To once again turn to Beeden’s article: “The parallel American episode is based on a basketball game between Michael’s office workers and those in the warehouse downstairs [...] Sport is seen to be an integral part of American culture and athletic ability is held as a form of cultural capital in that nation, and therefore the inclusion of a basketball game within the sitcom clearly positions it as a recognizable signifier of American culture.”(Beeden, 2013, p.11)

Once again, these findings can be confirmed by Jim’s behaviour in the sitcom. In the episode with the basketball game he says: “Basketball was kind of my thing in high school. Yeah, I’m looking forward to play. You know I think I’m going to impress a few people in here.” The last sentence is obviously targeted at Pam the receptionist as she appears right in the following scene and they make a deal about going to an outlet mall together on Saturday if Jim wins. One other important quality connected to American physicality is their competitiveness. During the match, Pam is utterly captivated by Tim who is obviously better in basketball than her fiancé. However, this competitiveness is also seen in situations which are not connected to sport and mainly related to work. For example, in Episode 17, Season 2 Jim is beaten by Dwight in the number of closed sales per year and looks quite upset. He asks Pam: “What did I do to deserve this?” Pam: “Are you sad that Dwight beat you?” Tim: “No.” P: “Are you gonna cry Jim? Do you need a tissue?”

This competitiveness is closely related to one more important difference between Tim and Jim and that is the attitude towards work. In the original version, Tim is a salesman who hates his job and is bored out of his mind with it. He says: “I’m a sales rep, which means that my job is to speak to clients on the phone about quantity and type of paper, and whether we can supply it with them, and whether they can pay

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T (reading an article in a newspaper): It says here that for women the most important quality in a man are eyes, smile, flat stomach, buttocks...

T: OK, well, let’s put it out. Sheila, what do you look for in a bloke?

T (to Dawn): What do you look for in a man?

D: Rugged good looks.

L: You used to tell me it’s a good sense of humour.

D (embarrassed, watching Tim): Yeah. You’ve got that. You’ve got a good sense of humour.

L: Yeah, I know.

The scene ends with both Tim and Dawn looking embarrassed.

for it. And I'm boring myself talking about it, which is..." (he makes a face). In the American version, the text is exactly the same, but still the feeling we get is that he does not mean it entirely seriously. When he says he is boring himself talking about his job he actually laughs. Also, in Episode 2, Season 1 he says about a contract he is hoping to get: „This is my biggest sale over year. They love me over there for some reason. I'm not really sure why, but you know I make one call over there every year just to renew their account and that one call ends up being 25% of my commission, for the whole year. So, you know I buy a mini-bottle of champagne and celebrate a little and this year I'm pushing recycled paper on them, for one percent more. I know, I'm getting cocky, right?" According to Ning Kang who studied this topic, the roots of the American's specific approach to work lay in early American Puritanism. He says: "By the eve of the Civil War, the value of acquiring wealth through hard work and thrift has stimulated fast development of American capitalism. [...] Now it is part of American national character. To most Americans, material achievements are the mark of one's success, the manifestation of their personal values, and the symbol of one's independence." (Kang, 2014, p. 150) That would answer the question why the attitude of the main character toward work could not simply stay the same as in the British original. The result is that while in the British version the main character is sick of his job and considers it pointless, its American counterpart actually likes it, even if he is sometimes frustrated – in this case mostly about an incompetent boss – and strives to be the best at it. We can see the emphasis Americans lay on work even in the opening credits of the sitcom. While in the British show there is only a depressing picture of traffic on a roundabout and big office blocks to be seen, a much more dynamic American version captures employees doing various tasks around the office – talking, counting, underlining, shredding, simply working in an office.

### **III. Dawn Tinsley/Pam Beesley**

As it was already stated Dawn Tinsley (UK)/Pam Beesley (US) is a receptionist who is in love with a salesman Tim/Jim although she is engaged to her fiancé Lee/Roy at the same time. At the end of Season 2 of the British version, which is not yet the end of the

sitcom as there are two more Christmas specials following, Dawn is persuaded by her fiancé Lee to go to the USA for a while which means she has to part with Tim. In the American version Jim kisses Pam at the end of the second season but she rejects him and he quits his job right afterwards. In the end, they get together in both versions after all.<sup>4</sup> However, there is an important difference between both versions and it is in the way it happens.

In a nutshell, we can say that in the British version it is always a man who has a substantial influence over Dawn's decisions. She went to America because of his fiancé and in the Christmas Special they have come back, again because he decided so. At the very end of the sitcom, she gets a unique Christmas present from Tim, which finally makes her summon the courage, break up with Lee and start a new relationship with Tim.

A significant difference in the American version is the fact that it is Pam herself who takes charge of her life. At the beginning of Season 3, a few days after she rejects Jim she calls off her wedding with Roy. She says: "Yeah, I didn't go through with the wedding. I got cold feet a few days before and I can't really explain it. I just had to get out of that relationship. We still had pay for all the food so we had to freeze it. But I'm doing quite well. I have my own apartment and I'm taking art classes." It can be argued that by breaking up with Roy she in fact decides to completely change her attitude to life. Over the course of Season 3 she gradually becomes more and more independent. She goes on dates, buys new clothes and even takes part in an art exhibition. Around this time Jim starts working in the office again and his new girlfriend Karen does too. Jim is still angry with Pam for having rejected him and he avoids her. In Episode 17 Pam says: „I've decided I'm going to be more honest. I'm gonna start telling people what I want directly. So look out world cause old Pammy is getting what she wants." But a real climax of her new lifestyle comes only in Episode 22, during an office trip where she turns out to be the only one who dares to walk across burning coals. Encouraged by her deed she tells Jim that she is really sorry he avoids her all the time. She says she completely accepts he has a girlfriend and only wants them to be friends. In Episode 23 the transition to an independent woman is complete. She says to the

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter actually overlaps the boundaries of the first two seasons as what is captured in the UK version in Season 2 and Christmas Specials is already a part of season 3 in the American version.

camera: „No, I don't know what future holds, but I'm optimistic, [...] Jim and I are just too similar, maybe one day I'll find my own Karen [...] but till then I can hold my head up“. She finally accepts the fact that she will never be with Jim and she is happy for him. And that is the moment when he breaks up with Karen and asks Pam out.

This example shows us the importance of independence for Americans as it is a quality which is deeply rooted in American psyche. As Ning Kang said in his article: „As is known, individualism is the core of American values. It is rooted deeply in early American Puritanism. Nowadays, the value of individualism has permeated every corner of American society. It places great value on self-reliance, on privacy, and on mutual respect.“ (Kang, 2014, p. 149) With Pam, American makers of the show in fact gave the audience a clear message. If you really want to be successful in life and get what you want, it is essential for you to become completely self-reliant first.

#### **IV. David Brent/Michael Scott**

With the character of David Brent (UK)/Michael Scott (US) we partly return to the topic explored in the chapter about Tim and Jim and that is the differences between the qualities which are most valued in the British and the American societies.

In the US version, the boss is portrayed as rather a stupid man who does not know much about business theory as he did not attend any university. In Episode 4, Season 2, during the wait for firemen to come as there is a fire in the office building, he talks with a temporary worker named Ryan and realizes that he attends a business school. This makes Michael quite upset and he defends himself by saying: “When I was Ryan's age I worked in a fast food restaurant to save up money for school. And then, eh, I lost it in a pyramid scheme, but I learnt more about business right then and there than business school would ever teach me or Ryan would ever teach me.” While Ryan is depicted as a person who knows all the business definitions, the boss is portrayed as someone who does not know much about business theory but who knows all important facts about business practice. He summarizes it in the same episode by saying: „Ryan is book smart and I am street smart... and book smart.” It is not a surprise then who is depicted as a better salesman. In Episode 7, Season 2 we can see the boss and his boss Jan Levenson at a meeting with an important client. While Jan rather unsuccessfully

tries to persuade the reluctant client Michael saves the day and uses his natural abilities and rather non-standard techniques to win the client over. He impresses his boss by this so much she sleeps with him the same night. The point the makers tried to make by this is quite clear. Formal education is not the most important thing; what really matters is real life experience. This point can be also illustrated by the fact that at the end of Episode 4, Season 2 we learn that it was Ryan who accidentally set the building on fire.

In the UK, other qualities are appreciated. We can see the equivalent of the Michael–Ryan relationship in a competition between the UK boss David and a temporary office worker called Ricky in Episode 3, Season 1 called “The Quiz”. Only in this case it is not the more skilled businessman who is appreciated but the one who is more educated and literate, which in this case is Ricky, who has just finished university (with excellent marks). During the episode Ricky mentions to David that he was on “Blockbusters”<sup>5</sup> and won several times. This makes David unhappy and jealous and during the course of the episode he unsuccessfully tries to make up a question for Ricky that he could not answer. However, Ricky proves to be unbeatable and David is defeated, which further lowers his authority. The success of the educated Ricky is underlined when in Episode 6, Season 1 David announces that Ricky is leaving the office and it is hinted he got a better job. This means education and literacy is stressed as a key to success in the British society.

Apart from the differences between the UK and the US in important qualities people associate with success there is one more remarkable difference embodied in the character of the boss. It is the way both nations refer to personal achievements. There are some peculiarities in the British approach towards this issue. In her book, the anthropologist Kate Fox explains British attitudes toward modesty. She says: “The English are no more naturally self-effacing than other nations, but we have strict rules about the *appearance* of modesty, including prohibitions on boasting and any form of self-importance, and rules actively prescribing self-depreciation and self-mockery. We place a high value on modesty, we *aspire* to modesty. [...] Our famous self-depreciation is a form of irony – saying the opposite of what we intend people to understand, or using deliberate understatement.” (Fox, 2004, p. 155) We can see many examples of

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<sup>5</sup> “Blockbusters” is a British television game show similar to the Czech “A-Z kvíz”.

this attitude in the sitcom. For example, in Episode 1, Season 2, when the boss tries to show an article about himself to one of his employees, he says: „Oh, no... Oh God, I found that in “Inside Paper”. It’s the trade magazine for the paper industry. My ugly mug on the front! Oh no, embarrassing.” However, even when he uses self-depreciation (ugly mug, oh no, embarrassing) he still breaks the behaviour code and is disdained by his employee by even bringing the paper up. We can find another example in Episode 1, Season 1, when a new temporary worker, Ricky, says about his university studies: “...Managed to scrape a first in the end.” Again, we can see a clear understatement.

There is nothing similar to these rules in the confident American society, where it is normal to talk or even boast about your successes. In the sitcom this is captured for example in Episode 17, Season 2 where the boss proudly shows us the plaques he won when he was voted the best sales representative of the year in the company. There is no sign of false modesty and the audience do not expect it either.

## **Chapter 4: Cultural and social phenomena of the present-day UK and US society**

As the sitcom “The Office” is supposed to reflect present-day reality, there are many cultural and social topics used in the show which are important for today’s American or British society. However, the US version covers most of these topics because of a simple fact that it consists of 28 episodes while the original of mere 14 and the fact that the original thematically revolves mostly around the possible job reductions in the office.

There is one interesting cultural phenomenon in the UK version, though. It is depicted in Episode 5, Season 2 called “Charity” and it is the Red Nose Day. The Red Nose Day is a popular charity event organized by Comic Relief charity which was founded in 1985 by Richard Curtis, one of Britain’s most successful comedy screenwriters, and a comedian Lenny Henry. The first Red Nose Day was held in 1988 and its proceeds went to Ethiopia which was heavily burdened by famine at that time. (Comic Relief, 2014) Now the charity helps the poor in Africa and in the UK. The Red

Nose Day is a day when people around Britain wear plastic red noses, dress into silly costumes and do silly things to raise money. In *The Office*, we can mention Dawn's collecting money by selling kisses for a pound, or Tim's getting sponsored by others to hide as many of Gareth's possessions as he can. The Red Nose Day and Comic Relief itself can be considered a quintessentially British phenomenon (although it has spread to other countries too, such as the USA) and with its emphasis on humour it is absolutely unique.

In the US version of "The Office" there are other themes discussed. For example, Episode 2, Season 1, called "Diversity Day", covers the topic of racial awareness in a workplace which is a pervasive topic in present American society. In the episode we can see an office seminar taking place which is led by a black man called Mr. Brown and who is almost immediately offended by Michael who thinks his name is just a test. The aim of the seminar is to raise awareness of racial issues and to educate people about other cultures. Naturally it all ends catastrophically thanks to Michael who unintentionally offends almost everyone in the office. However, this episode has real foundations as a great number of similar seminars and workshops actually take place in today's business environment in the USA and many companies send their employees there. (Mirza, 2005) Further on in the sitcom, a similar seminar is held in Episode 2, Season 2, only this time on sexual harassment which is also a burning issue for the business environment in the US.

Another topical issue is pictured in Episode 3, Season 1, with a symptomatic name "Health Care". In this episode the boss is assigned a task to choose a new health care plan for his employees. However, he delegates this responsibility to Dwight who immediately chooses the cheapest plan to save company money, which raises great dissatisfaction and anxiety around the office. As the boss refuses to change Dwight's decision the employees are left with a horrible health care plan and we can see one of the rare moments when they all really detest him. These emotions are not surprising at all though if we realise how incredibly important it is to have a good healthcare plan in the USA. The situation is further complicated by the fact that a majority of these plans only work if you are employed and once you lose your job you end up without covered health expenditures. In her article Dona Ballman even says that many companies cut off the insurance of a worker the same day they are fired which means they have to deal

with their health insurance right away. (Ballman, 2014) There were several attempts made by US governments and even presidents over the course of history to change the situation but unfortunately a satisfactory solution is still to be found.

## Chapter 5: Differences in Humour

The chapter analysing differences in humour between the British and the American version of “The Office” certainly belongs to one of the crucial parts of this thesis. There is a substantial difference in the attitude to humour between both countries. It almost seems that while in the US humour is perceived only as a pleasant pastime, in the UK it has its place right at the core of all British culture and social values.<sup>6</sup> When we look at what is the most prevalent means in British and American humour we will find that while the Americans tend to appreciate physical comedy, the British are fonder of its verbal form.

There are many examples of the popularity of physical comedy in America in “The Office”. For example, in Episode 5, Season 1 (“Basketball”) there are full eight minutes dedicated to capturing the game where we can laugh at Michael for sucking in basketball, at Dwight who takes his T-shirt off which repels his own team or at many other actions. Another comedy device the Americans are fond of is practical jokes. In “The Office” Jim constantly plays practical jokes at Dwight. For example in Episode 6, Season 2 he moves Dwight’s office desk to the bathroom, or he puts Dwight’s desk supplies in the snack machine and Dwight has to buy them back. In “The Office”, there is a considerable amount of comic situations based on physical comedy.

However, as it has already been said, it is verbal humour which is prevalent in the UK. In the original version of “The Office” many verbal devices are used to create comedy. Let us examine at least the most prominent ones. Firstly, there are puns.<sup>7</sup> The usage of puns expects a larger vocabulary range to produce it but also to understand it. However it is also often used in obscene jokes. In “The Office” (Episode 1, Season 1) there is a situation where Tim places Gareth’s stapler in jelly. He is obviously angry, but

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<sup>6</sup> Comic Relief charity is one of the classic examples of this. Where else in the world could you see the money raised primarily by the country’s most famous comedians?

<sup>7</sup> The pun is a form of word play that suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect. (Wikipedia, 2014)

Tim says to him: “Gareth, it’s only a trifling matter<sup>8</sup>.” And Ricky continues by saying: “You should put him in custody.” Both jokes elicit a universal laugh.

Puns are also often used in jokes about sex which are universally and abundantly used across all social classes. As Kate Fox puts it: „Jokes about sex, even quite explicit ones, are acceptable; earnest or fervent talk about the same intimate physical details is obscene. [...] It is not exactly a taboo subject, but one that should only be talked about in a light-hearted, unserious, jokey manner.” (Kate Fox, 2004, p. 112) That means while in the US it is uncommon to joke about sex with someone else than your close friends, in the UK the attitude towards this kind of humour is much more relaxed. This can be supported by the scenes from the UK “The Office” where on one occasion Tim gets a giant inflatable penis as a birthday present (Episode 3, Season 1) and then a female employee gets a vibrator from her colleagues. Also a favourite pastime of Dawn and Tim is to make Gareth look like a gay:

T: Gareth, we need your help. I was wondering if a military man like you – a soldier – could, could you give a man a lethal blow?

G: If I was forced to, I could. If it was absolutely necessary. If he was attacking me.

T: If he was coming really hard.

G: Yeah, if my life was in danger, yeah.

D: And do you always imagine doing it face to face with a bloke or could you take a man from behind?

G: Either way is easy.

D: Either way. And, so you could do a man from behind?

G: Yeah.

D: Yeah, lovely.

While in the UK version of the sitcom everyone can participate in these jokes, in the US version the atmosphere is much more prudent as only the boss makes such jokes from time to time and nobody laughs at them. It is important to add that racist jokes are off-limits in both versions.

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<sup>8</sup> The joke is based on the word “trifle” which means a matter of only small importance but also it is a kind of sweet dish.

The last comedy device examined here which is also an integral part of British character is irony. The difference between the usage of irony between the British and the Americans was very well summarized by Simon Pegg, an English comedian: „That’s right: Americans don’t do irony. This isn’t strictly true. Although it is true that we British do use irony a little more often than our special friends in the US. It’s like the kettle to us: it’s always on, whistling slyly in the corner of our daily interactions. To Americans, however, it’s more like a nice teapot, something to be used when the occasion demands it. This is why an ironic comment will sometimes be met with a perplexed smile by an unwary American.” (Pegg, 2007) We can see abundant examples of irony in the UK version of “The Office“, such as this conversation which takes place during Tim unwrapping his giant penis present in front of Dawn.

D: God, you haven’t got one already, have you?

T: Em, no. You can never have too many anyway.

D: And you do prefer it to the money?

T: Yeah, yeah. I’d only spent it on a huge inflatable cock.

As Kate Fox points out: “What is unique about English humour is the pervasiveness of irony and the importance we attach to it. Irony is the dominant ingredient in English humour, not just a piquant flavouring.” (Fox, 2004, p. 27) After examining the British version of “The Office” there is nothing we can do but agree with her statement.

## **Conclusion**

It is my sincere belief that it can prove extremely beneficial for teachers of foreign languages to use video material in classrooms. Today, there is a great variety of programmes to choose from so it is only a matter of taste. However, if we want these activities to be maximally effective we have to choose a programme which our students will actually like and which will entertain as well as educate them. For that purpose TV shows and sitcoms are the most eligible as they enrich us not only in a linguistic field but also in the sphere of culture.

My hypothesis for this Bachelor thesis was the statement that the production of a sitcom is strongly influenced by the culture of the country for which it is being filmed and that this can manifest itself in the behaviour of the characters, in the cultural and social topics depicted in the sitcom and in the humour employed. This hypothesis which was tested on the British and the American version of the sitcom “The Office” proved to be right as was demonstrated on many occasions throughout the thesis. We have learned that there is a tendency in the British sitcoms to make the main characters losers in contrast to the American shows in which the main characters tend to be considerably more successful. We have also discovered some unique national traits of the British and the Americans based on the sitcom “The Office”, such as the emphasis the British put on intelligence, literacy, wit and, most importantly, humour, in their society while Americans stress other qualities, such as independence, confidence, success and others. We have also broadened our horizons with the analysis of current social and cultural phenomena in the British and the American society such as the quintessentially British charity event, or the phenomenon of racial awareness and the importance of having a good medical scheme (both captured in the US version). In the last part of the analyses we have looked into the topic of humour and found out that while the British tend to appreciate verbal comedy, the Americans are fonder of humour based on physicality.

At the end of my thesis it is necessary to point out that the findings from the analysis of the sitcom “The Office” are really just the tip of the iceberg. There is a great number of other cultural differences between the UK and the US version of “The Office” which reveal much about those societies and which would certainly be worth mentioning. However, they will probably have to wait till the next analysis.

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