

British humour

Lead-in

- 1 What makes you laugh? Make a note of all the times you can remember laughing at recently.
- 2 Work in pairs. Share your experiences with a partner. Did you laugh at the same type of things?
- 3 Match the different types of comedy with the definitions (1–8).

satire slapstick dark humour a stand-up deadpan
a mockumentary a situation comedy (sitcom) a farce

- 1 pretending to be serious when being funny
 - 2 a comedy show based around the same group of characters and location
 - 3 a pretend documentary
 - 4 humour based on simple actions such as falling over
 - 5 comedy arising from a ridiculous situation
 - 6 finding humour in sad or unpleasant situations
 - 7 the use of humour as a form of criticism
 - 8 a comedian telling jokes and funny stories to a live audience
- 4 Which type of humour is described in the following examples?
- 1 On 1 April 1957 the BBC showed a factual programme about the spaghetti harvest in Switzerland.

 - 2 'Dr Strangelove' is a 1964 comedy film about nuclear war.
 - 3 In Charlie Chaplin's silent films, he made people laugh using visual humour.
 - 4 In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Queen Titania falls in love with a donkey.

 - 5 Most newspapers in Europe carry cartoons making fun of politics and politicians.
 - 6 Jack Dee is a British comic who is very funny, but never laughs at his own jokes.
 - 7 American actor, Robin Williams, started his career telling jokes in San Francisco bars.
 - 8 The American series *Friends* followed the lives of a group of friends living in Manhattan.

Input

- 1 Can you think of some examples of British and American comedy shows? Do you think that British comedy and American comedy are different? If so, in what way?
- 2 Read the newspaper article and compare with your ideas from 1.

*Divided by a Common Language**

While Britain is no longer the economic powerhouse it once was, there is at least one area in which the nation continues to thrive – British comedy shows are translated and exported all over the world.

One of the most well-received British comedies of recent years was *The Office*. It was co-written by Ricky Gervais who played the main character, David Brent, and immediately hit it big in Britain when it was launched in 2001. Brent is the boss of the imaginary Wernham Hogg, a modest paper company in the real town of Slough, west of London. The humour is deadpan, sometimes dark, and the show is presented as a 'mockumentary' about everyday life in this unremarkable office.

The programme has been a success in over 80 countries. In the States, however, an American remake was a complete flop which nearly folded after the first season. The Americans, it seemed, just didn't find it funny until it was considerably revised, at which point it went down a storm and ran for nine seasons. So, why didn't the British version of *The Office* do well in the States and what changes had to be made to turn it around?

For one thing, David Brent, the boss in the British version, shows very little interest in work and his main concern is to impress his co-workers. To an American audience, a boss who doesn't even try to work falls flat because he just didn't seem believable. Indeed, Brent in the English version is a thoroughly dislikeable character, a show-off who is annoying, rude and selfish, desperate for the attention and approval of his co-workers. Michael Scott, the main character in the American version, is portrayed as trying to work hard, even if his ideas usually fail. Scott could be accused of being inefficient and slightly pathetic, but the viewer feels sorry for him rather than hating him.

Another difference is the treatment of romance. In the British *Office*, the main love story is the romantic tension between the plain receptionist and a kindly sales representative which for most of the series comes to nothing. In the American show, the couple are more obviously attractive and their love affair progresses more smoothly. The British shyness and reserve are replaced by American assertiveness and self-confidence.

The setting of *The Office* is also treated differently. Scanton, the real town which is the location of the American version of the show, is a little dull but not unpleasant. Indeed a member of the town council of Scanton said the town was flourishing as a result of the show. Slough, in contrast, is shown as a miserable concrete jungle, which went down badly with Slough residents who complained about the negative image of their town.

In short, the British version of *The Office* is much more pessimistic. Nobody works, nobody seems to be satisfied with their lives, nobody looks good and the laughs come from the black humour of the awful situation in which the characters find themselves. While the Brits laugh themselves silly, American audiences just didn't get the joke. Their version is much more optimistic with a Mr Bean type boss who provides slapstick laughs and an office where romance can blossom.

So, why does a popular British comedy bomb in the States until it is heavily revised? The BBC Washington correspondent thinks he may have the answer: 'It might just be that the kinder, gentler American TV show reflects a kinder and gentler country.'

* This description of the relationship between Britain and America is attributed to the British writer G. B. Shaw

3 Are these sentences true (T) or false (F) according to the article?

- 1 Britain is still economically strong.
- 2 *The Office* was an instant success in Britain.
- 3 The British version of *The Office* initially did badly in the US.
- 4 The boss in the American version is more unpleasant than in the British series.
- 5 Scanton benefitted from featuring in the programme.
- 6 Slough is described as an attractive modern town.
- 7 *The American Office* is a happier place than the British one.

4 Do you think there is much difference between British humour and the sense of humour in your country? Can you describe the difference?

Language focus

1 Look through the article again and underline expressions which mean ‘succeed’ and ‘fail’? Add them to the table below.

Succeed	Fail
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2 Look at the expressions below. Mark whether they are used to talk about things that are ‘funny’ (F) or ‘not funny’ (NF).

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|---|---|
| <p><i>I find it really funny.</i></p> <p><i>It left me cold.</i></p> <p><i>I just don’t get it.</i></p> <p><i>I laughed myself silly.</i></p> | <p><i>She had me in stitches.</i></p> <p><i>It didn’t even raise a snigger.</i></p> <p><i>I nearly died laughing.</i></p> <p><i>He makes me crack up.</i></p> |
|---|---|

3 Complete the sentences with phrases from 1 and 2.

- 1 Everybody laughed at the joke, but I didn’t understand why it was funny. I
- 2 Mr Bean is very popular throughout the world – it seems to in every country.
- 3 *The Office* was in France, until it was remade in French.
- 4 The funniest film I’ve ever seen was Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. The first time I saw it I
- 5 Germans love British humour and British comedy programmes in Germany.
- 6 The famous British comedy *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* when it was first shown in the US and the first series was cancelled.

Task

- 1 You work for a television company and need to choose a comedy show which you can adapt to be shown in your country. Think about what comedy programmes are currently shown on TV in your country. What type of humour do they represent? Which do you think are the most successful? Discuss with your group.
- 2 Your teacher will give you each a card with some information about a successful British comedy show. Read about the show and present it to your group. Discuss each one and decide if you think it would be successful in your country and what changes would have to be made for it to be a success.
- 3 Present your ideas to the class. You only have enough money for one show, so try to decide which show to choose to go on TV in your country.

Review
