

Michael Scott's anti-proverbs and pseudo-proverbs as a source of humour in *The Office*

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Abstract

This article analyses the use of proverbs in the American version of the sitcom The Office, especially in relation to Michael Scott, the show's main protagonist. The purpose of the study is to explore the possibilities of proverbs as a comedic device and the use that scriptwriters make of paremiology for the portrayal of fictional characters. The case of Michael Scott is paradigmatic for these two approaches because, apart from being the protagonist of one of the most influential comedies in the last two decades, he exemplifies a creative use of paremiology through which he often modifies existing proverbs or invents proverb-like statements to support his ideas, rather than reciting proverbs in their canonical wording. As can be inferred, the intention of these paremiological practices is to make the audience laugh. From this analysis, we can draw the conclusion that scriptwriters deliberately include non-canonical proverbs in Michael's speech for the humorous possibilities that they offer. Consequently, this procedure determines Michael's characterisation in a way that relates to the traditional incongruity theory of humour. Finally, this paper intends to contribute to the establishment of a trend in current proverb scholarship that studies paremias for their comedic uses in modern media and to the dismissal of the widespread idea that they are not relevant in today's society.

Keywords: anti-proverbs, humour, proverbs, pseudo-proverbs, The Office.

1. Introduction

The Office is a popular North American TV series that ran for nine seasons between 2005 and 2013 on the National Broadcasting Company. The show is the American adaptation of a British series that ran between 2001 and 2003 on the BBC (Gupta & Plowman 2001-2003). For its adaptation to its new audience, as Wells-Lassagne (2012: 186) explains, *The Office* underwent various modifications to accommodate the tastes of its American viewership. Among other reasons, this series is culturally relevant because it is claimed to have been “the first to bring the humour of discomfort to the States”, although this discomfort is not as marked as in its British counterpart. *The Office* is a mockumentary about daily life in the regional branch of a paper-selling company named Dunder Mifflin in Scranton, Pennsylvania which is overseen by Michael Scott, its charismatic regional manager. While part of the

humour in the series has not aged well due to society's increased awareness of equality of rights regarding gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, all of which are recurring themes for jokes in the series, the cult status of the show remains intact almost a decade after the series finale. What is more, from the point of view of its impact on popular culture, *The Office* remains as relevant as when it was first aired, as shown below:



Figure 1: Diagram showing the global interest in *The Office* between its premiere, 24 March 2005, and the composition of this paper (December 2022). Source: Google Trends.

Apart from this illustrative chart, another piece of evidence that proves the prevalence of the show in popular culture is the fact that some of the most popular video streaming platforms, such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, keep the show in their catalogues, and a constant stream of Internet memes inspired by the series continue to appear on online media ten years after the show's finale.¹ Furthermore, *The Office's* cultural relevance is corroborated by the academic interest that the show and its protagonist for seven seasons, Michael Scott, have garnered, as in the study by Detweiler (2012) about the use of irony and paradoxes in the series. Likewise, other scholarly works have analysed *The Office* as an example of techniques that should be avoided in organisational behaviour (Cain & Policastro 2013) or professional communication (Bloch & Sparta 2016) as well as to illustrate courses on hospitality human resource management (Lipford & Rood 2020).

In this paper, Michael Scott's use of proverbs is analysed for its comedic value under the consideration that this is a deliberate technique used by the show's creators to portray the character. To do this, providing a definition of *proverb* becomes indispensable. According to W. Mieder (2004: 3), "[a] proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation". Even if this is a rather general explanation, it serves the purpose of a working definition. In relation to this, it must be noted that an all-encompassing and universally accepted definition of proverbs has not been arrived at yet. In fact, as happens in many other fields of study, the inability by scholars to agree on a broadly accepted definition of proverb is one of the main shortcomings of Paremiology as a discipline. Yet, it is not the purpose of this work to redefine the established theoretical framework for proverb scholarship but to analyse the use of paremias, i.e., "proverb or proverbial saying[s]" (Lauhakangas 2014: 57), as a humorous device in one of the most culturally influential shows in the 21st century.

Proverbs, as the items of folklore they are (Dundes 2007), may be purposefully modified by speakers through four main procedures: reduction, expansion, substitution, and permutation (Fiedler 2007: 95); with a fifth type that implies the negation of an affirmative proverb and vice versa (Fiedler 2007: 96). These modifications lead to what is known as *anti-proverbs* or *deautomatised proverbs*

¹ See <https://knowyourmeme.com/search?q=the+office>.

(Mena Martínez 2003; Martí Sánchez 2015: 118). As Mieder (2014: 40) affirms, “much of this humorous, ironical or satirical manipulation of common proverbs is taking place in the vast arena of the mass media”. More specifically, in the case under study, this satirical use of proverbs is deliberately introduced by the show’s scriptwriters, who are aware of the communicative and comedic potential of the manipulation of these traditional, assertive uses of language. Yet, for this humorous effect to be achieved, the receiver of the utterance, the audience in this case, must recognise the original proverb to which the speaker is referring (Litovkina 2017: 114). From the scope of humour scholarship, this occurrence seems to relate most readily to the incongruity theory (Morreall 2009: 9-15), which explains why the modification of proverbs as an unexpected linguistic turn is an effective comedic device.

A common reason for the use of proverbs is the conversational advantage they seem to grant the speaker. Generally, people use proverbs with admonishing or evaluative intentions, but with the appearance of new forms of communication and entertainment, proverbs have begun to be used more frequently as a means of producing humour, often through their modification or ironic use (Vargha & Litovkina 2013; Litovkina 2017). This use of proverbs has been studied in depth by A. T. Litovkina, the author of multiple works on the topic, such as her collaboration with Mieder, *Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs* (Litovkina & Mieder 1999), and more recently, the chapter on anti-proverbs included in Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Aleksa Varga’s comprehensive volume *Introduction to Paremiology* (Litovkina 2014) as well as another collaborative volume analysing the use of anti-proverbs in five languages (Litovkina et al. 2021). The present paper, however, intends to take a slightly different approach, focusing on the creative use of proverbs in *The Office* as one of the most influential TV series in popular culture in English in the 21st century. Thus, apart from the aforementioned *anti-proverbs*, we will also analyse several cases of *pseudo-proverbs* found in the series. To clarify the difference between the two labels, whereas anti-proverbs are “intentionally changed [...] proverb[s] with a new meaning and often a humorous or satirical effect” (Hrisztova-Gotthardt & Aleksa Varga 2014: 353), pseudo-proverbs can be defined as “proverb-like statement[s] invented to resemble a proverb [...] that may, if repeated over time, become a new proverb” (Hrisztova-Gotthardt & Aleksa Varga 2014: 361).² As shall be seen, even if it is unlikely that any of the cases analysed have caught on, they have an effect similar to anti-proverbs and contribute to the characterization of the protagonist of the series, Michael Scott. For our analysis, we have surveyed Michael’s use of both anti-proverbs and pseudo-proverbs to determine how these non-canonical proverbial utterances contribute to the comedic effect sought by scriptwriters and to Michael’s characterisation.

2. Michael Scott’s use of proverbs

Michael Scott comes across as a likeable character who wins over the audience, despite his apparent ineptitude as a boss, his demeaning treatment of his employees, and his delusions of grandeur. This particular representation of a boss figure not only plays an important role in the comedic development of the series but it also has certain implications from a sociological point of view. As Birthisel & Martin explain (2013: 76), “[by] turning bosses, corporate leaders, and other symbols of capitalist patriarchal authority into buffoons, *The Office* has at least the potential to inspire white-collar workers to question the consent they give to an unbalanced employment system”. Thus, the complexity of this show goes beyond its use of humour and the character of Michael Scott becomes allegorical of work

² These definitions are taken from a glossary of paremiological terms included at the end of the work cited.

hierarchies and power structures, which are also relevant to Paremiology inasmuch as the use of proverbs is perceived as endowing the speaker with conversational authority.

Apart from this, Michael is portrayed as a daydreaming boss with an alarming detachedness from reality, or as Helene Beesly, the character whom he dated briefly in the series, describes him, a tendency towards “self-delusion” (7x4).³ Michael’s character creates situations that make viewers cringe, but which carry most of the comedic value of the show. Quite shockingly, the Scranton branch of Dunder Mifflin repeatedly arises as one of the most profitable for the company, making Michael emerge victorious from the different conflicts he must face despite the unorthodoxy of the methods he usually employs to solve those conflicts. This is at times achieved through unexpected, *deus ex machina* turns of events that remind the audience of the fictional character of the production and which allow the show to keep running. In relation to this, it must be borne in mind that the mockumentary genre presents the aesthetics and style found in legitimate documentaries but showing fictional action, typically as comedy. This choice leads to various recurring gags in the series such as the breaking of the fourth wall when characters look directly into the camera or the pretended individual interviews of the different characters with the filmmakers in which they give their own account of what is happening in the episode in question.

Apart from his childish character and apparent lack of leading abilities, Michael is extremely charming and faces every challenge he encounters with optimism and a good sense of humour. This sense of humour becomes evident in the frequent jokes he cracks and the use of puns and other witty remarks. Among his many jokes and funny observations throughout the series, there is a recurring sentence which Michael uses thirty-four times in the seven seasons in which he appears and which has caught on among fans of the series:⁴ “that’s what she said”. Michael often uses this sentence to comment on any statement that has the slightest sexual innuendo and it has become the quotation most readily associated with the show. However, from a perspective of gender, this may strike the audience as offensive, “trivialising sexual harassment and letting it go unpunished” (Birthisel & Martin 2013: 77), which exemplifies the claim made above that some of the jokes in the show have not aged well. This exemplifies how television series may help popularise a catchphrase, whether it is a proverb or otherwise, supporting the claim that will be analysed below that pseudo-proverbs may indeed catch on and become proper proverbs under certain circumstances, especially if promoted by such a successful and influential series as the one under scrutiny here.

The first two cases of the use of “that’s what she said” take place in the second episode of the second season, titled “Sexual Harassment” (2x2), in which the following exchange takes place:

MICHAEL SCOTT We have to watch Toby’s video that he’s showing us, in order to brainwash us, and I was wondering if anybody would like to join in? Gonna be fun. Got microwave pizza. What do you say? Jim?

JIM HALPERT No, thanks, I’m good.

MICHAEL SCOTT That’s what she said. Pam?

PAM BEESLY My mother’ coming.

MICHAEL SCOTT That’s what she said. No, but, okay, well, suit yourself.

In this brief conversation, Michael strings two uses of, arguably, the sentence that has become most identifiable in the series and which other characters use at different times to get back at him, causing

³Henceforth, we will cite the episodes following this convention according to which, the first number indicates the season and the second, the episode within said season.

⁴Michael Scott does not appear in the 8th season of the series and only reappears in the last episode, and series finale, of the 9th season. As a result, the character appears in 139 episodes of the total 188 originally aired.

his annoyance as he considers it “his joke” (2x12). This is the most frequently repeated humorous remark by Michael and it could be considered a phraseologism due to its fossilised structure.

The show's most iconic catchphrase aside, and before moving to the central topic of this paper, i.e., the creative use of proverbs, Michael also makes a relatively frequent use of canonical proverbs throughout the series, some examples of which are:

- 1) MICHAEL SCOTT Money isn't everything, Jim. It's not the key to happiness. (1x4)
A canonical use of the proverb “money isn't everything” (Mieder et al. 1996: 417).
- 2) MICHAEL SCOTT And I'm your party captain, too! And you are gonna put on your dancing shoes later on! (2x11)
An allusion to the proverb “you need more than dancing shoes to be a dancer” (Mieder et al. 1996: 133).
- 3) MICHAEL SCOTT You know what they say the best medicine is.
KEVIN MALONE Well, the doctor said a combination of Interferon and Dacarbazine.
MICHAEL SCOTT And laughter also. (2x19)
A double allusion to the proverb “laughter is the best medicine” (Mieder et al. 1996: 362).
- 4) MICHAEL SCOTT I'm gonna put my money where my mouth is. (3x1)
A canonical use of the proverbial sentence “put your money where your mouth is” (Mieder et al. 1996: 418).
- 5) MICHAEL SCOTT I need you to dig up some dirt on Josh. Find out if there are any skeletons in his attic. (3x2)
An allusion to the proverbs “no man is qualified to remove the skeleton from his own closet” (Mieder et al. 1996: 544) and “there's a skeleton in every family closet” (Mieder et al. 1996: 544).
- 6) MICHAEL SCOTT Live and let live.
DWIGHT SCHRUTE I'm not familiar with that expression.
MICHAEL SCOTT It's a James Bond..
DWIGHT SCHRUTE It doesn't make any sense... Of course I'm alive. (5x13)
A canonical use of the proverb “live and let live” (Mieder et al. 1996: 381).
- 7) MICHAEL SCOTT They say that laughter is the best medicine. So Stanley, you can throw away those pills, you are cured. (5x15)
Another use of the proverb “laughter the best medicine” (Mieder et al. 1996: 362) in its canonical wording.
- 8) MICHAEL SCOTT When are you people going to stop casting the first stone? (6x25)
An allusion to the Biblical proverb “let him that is without sin cast the first stone” (Mieder et al. 1996: 85).
- 9) MICHAEL SCOTT Be careful what you wish for, Toby. (7x2)
An allusion to the proverbs “be careful what you wish for, you might get it” (Speake 2015: 44) or “don' wish too hard: you might just get what you wish for” (Mieder et al. 1996: 663).

From these examples of standard uses of proverbs, various inferences can be made about Michael's paremiological competence, i.e., “[his] active and the passive knowledge of proverbs” (Hrisztova-Gotthard and Aleksa Varga 2014: 358).⁵ To begin with, and as supported by the examples that will be analysed below, Michael arises as the character most inclined to the use of proverbs in the whole series. Together with his modifications of proverbs, these examples illustrate the other ways in which proverbs may be used, such as canonical uses, e.g., examples 1, 4, 6, and 7, or as allusions to proverbial ideas, e.g., 2, 3, and 5. The difference between allusion and modification is that, whereas the former does not necessarily imply an adaptation of the original intention with which the canonical

⁵This definition has been taken from the glossary at the end of the work cited.

proverb is used for its application to a different context, the latter indirectly evokes the idea expressed by a proverb.

Incidentally, the fact that Michael uses the proverb “laughter is the best medicine” twice is indicative not only of his paremiological competence but also of his world view, as he is continuously causing comedic situations, both on purpose and accidentally. Finally, example 6 is particularly relevant for two reasons: on the one hand, Michael mistakes the origin of the proverb, which by definition is supposed to be unknown, as originating in a James Bond film, presumably mistaking the proverb for the title of the *Live and Let Die* Bond film (Hamilton 1973). On the other hand, despite this being a fairly well-known and widely used proverb (see Mieder 2004: 129-130), Dwight Schrute, the other remarkably proficient character in the use of proverbs in the show, admits that he is not familiar with it, which causes yet another incongruence, this time in relation to how the character is presented throughout the series as he repeatedly shows a significant mastery of proverbs.

2.1. M. Scott’s use of anti-proverbs

Anti-proverbs are playful parodies or contradictions made on traditional, canonical proverbs (Litovkina et al. 2021: 14). Throughout Michael’s seven-season stint in *The Office*, fourteen such occurrences have been found:

- 10) MICHAEL SCOTT I’m an early bird and a night owl. So I’m wise and I have worms. (2x3)
A convoluted expansion to the proverb “the early bird catches the worm” (Mieder et al. 1996: 52).
- 11) MICHAEL SCOTT I will be taking Jim’s clients today because he is not here, and out of sight, out of the contest. (2x14)
A case of modification by substitution of the proverb “out of sight, out of mind” (Mieder et al. 1996: 412).
- 12) MICHAEL SCOTT Pizza, the great equalizer... Rich people love pizza. Poor people love pizza. White people love pizza. Black people love pizza. Do black people like pizza? (2x15)
Another case of substitution of a variant of the proverb “hunger is a great leveller” (Mieder et al. 1996: 318).
- 13) MICHAEL SCOTT Children cannot lie. They are innocent and they speak the truth. And out of the mouths of babes, Michael Scott is freakin’ cool. (2x18)
An example of reduction and blending of the proverbs “children and fools speak the truth” (Mieder et al. 1996: 96) and “out of the mouths of babes” (Mieder et al. 1996: 33).
- 14) MICHAEL SCOTT Dwight betrayed me once before. So this is his strike two. You know what they say. Fool me once, strike one. But fool me twice... strike three. (3x12)
Another example of substitution, in this case to the proverb “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me” (Mieder et al. 1996: 226).
- 15) MICHAEL SCOTT All right, ready? Come on, guys, early worm gets the worm.
JIM HALPERT Another worm? Like, are they friends?
DWIGHT SCHRUTE It’s early bird gets the worm. (3x17)
Similarly to example 1), this is a redundant case of substitution of the proverb “the early bird catches the worm” (Mieder et al. 1996: 52).
- 16) MICHAEL SCOTT You know what I was thinking might be sort of fun? Is if you forgave me... In front of everybody.
MEREDITH PALMER Michael, I’m not gonna do that ...
MICHAEL SCOTT ’cause you know what they say in the Bible about forgiveness? Forgiveness... Is next to Godliness.
MEREDITH PALMER You cracked my pelvis... (4x1)
A case of substitution in the use of the proverb “cleanliness is next to godliness” (Mieder et al. 1996: 101).

- 17) MICHAEL SCOTT What have we learned? Well, we have learned that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Because it's illegal. And you will go to jail. (4x2)
An example of expansion to the well-known proverb "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" (Mieder et al. 1996: 162).
- 18) JAN LEVINSON You know, Pam, in Spain, they often don't even start eating until midnight.
MICHAEL SCOTT When in Rome. (4x9)
An example of reduction to the proverb "when in Rome do as Romans do" (Mieder et al. 1996: 515).
- 19) MICHAEL SCOTT Here we go, fourth time's a charm. (5x6)
A substitution to the proverb "third time lucky/is a charm" (Mieder et al. 1996: 597).
- 20) MICHAEL SCOTT Just seems awfully mean. But sometimes, the ends justify the mean. (5x9)
Another example of modification by substitution using the proverb "the end justifies the means" (Mieder et al. 1996: 179).
- 21) MICHAEL SCOTT In nature, there's something called the food chain. It is where the shark eats the little shark, and the little shark eats the little shark. And so on and so on and so on until you get down to the single-cell shark. So now, replace sharks with paper companies and that is all you need to know about business. (5x13)
A rather complex proverbial modification that brings together an example of substitution to the canonical form of the proverb "big fish eat little fish" (Mieder et al. 1996: 213) and its blending with the proverb "big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite them, and little fleas have lesser fleas, and so *ad finitum*" (Mieder et al. 1996: 215; Speake 2015: 26).
- 22) MICHAEL SCOTT You know what they say, "keep your friends close." (5x22)
A reduction of the modern proverb "keep your friends close but your enemies closer" (Mieder 2014: 39).
- 23) MICHAEL SCOTT You can take the man out of the salesman, but you can't take the sales out of salesman. (6x16)
A final example of modification by substitution, in this case to the proverb "you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy" (Mieder et al. 1996: 66).

These fourteen examples illustrate three of the four main ways in which proverbs may be modified: expansion (e.g., 10, 13, 17, and 21); reduction (e.g., 18 and 23); substitution (e.g., 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, and 20). The only type of modification that is not present here is permutation, which implies the change of roles of elements present in the canonical form of a proverb. To exemplify this with a proverb from the list above, a case of permutation would be "the early worm catches the bird", where 'bird' and 'worm' have been switched.

Apart from sorting these anti-proverbs according to the type of modification they include, we can also arrange them according to whether Michael uses them as a purposeful manipulation of an existing proverb to support his opinion or whether, conversely, those modifications are the result of his lack of knowledge about the actual meaning or use of said proverbs. Seemingly, the first group is more numerous and it includes examples 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, and 23. Nevertheless, there are also four examples that seem to result from his lack of paremiological competence: 10, 18, 20, and 22. Thus, whereas example 1 expands on a proverbial idea by adding a contradictory concept that seems mutually exclusive with the first, example 18 is motivated by Michael's deficient knowledge of geography. The reason for this assumption is that, although it is true that this proverb is used as a general concept, regardless of one's location, Jan Levison makes a cultural reference to Spanish habits to justify their decision of eating dinner at such a late time. Consequently, since they are not in Spain but in Pennsylvania, Michael's observation seems out of place and possibly motivated by his confusion about both Mediterranean countries. Example 20 is a dubious one as it may indeed be a purposeful modification of a proverb using a paronomastic pun, to follow Vargha & Litovkina's classification (2014: 17), but the seriousness in Michael's countenance and the context in which he

makes the proverbial reference do not give the impression that he is indeed using a play on words. Another likely explanation is that the similarity between both words motivates Michael's mistake, especially considering that 'means' is a singular noun that ends in '-s', a convention generally associated with plural nouns. Finally, example 23 seems clear as, to begin with, it is introduced by the formula "you know what they say", one of the various introductory phrases frequently used with proverbs and which serve to identify them as such (Grzybek 2014: 73).

Another circumstance that catches the attention of a viewer with an acute paremiological awareness is that Michael misuses the well-known and widespread proverb "the early bird catches the worm" twice. Whereas the first time is a monologue in front of the camera crew recording an individual interview for the pretend documentary, the second time is in a conversation with two other characters. In their usual fashion, which exemplifies the personalities of the different characters, Jim Halpert takes advantage of Michael's verbal slip to mock him, whereas Dwight seizes the opportunity to correct his boss in his typical pretentious manner. Furthermore, this contravenes the example mentioned above in which it is Michael who makes a correct use of a well-known proverb with which Dwight admits to not be familiar.

From these examples, we can conclude that Michael Scott's misuse of proverbs is one of the features that the scriptwriters use to portray the character as not excessively cultured but also as naive and self-righteous. As has been shown, in some cases, the modifications are intentional in order for him to prove the point he is trying to make and to reaffirm his condition as the boss. In other cases, however, these proverbial modifications are the result of his intended limited paremiological competence. In both instances, the result is comical with regard to what the incongruity theory of humour establishes (Morreall 2009: 9-15). This is enhanced by the audience's feeling of superiority (Morreall 2009: 4-9) under the consideration that Michael's cultural deficiencies make him unfit for the leadership role he plays.

2.2. M. Scott's use of pseudo-proverbs

As explained in the introduction to this article, 'pseudo-proverbs' are impromptu proverb-like statements which have not acquired the consideration of proverbs, even though they may become full-blown proverbs if they achieve a reasonable degree of popularity among a community of speakers. As Konstantinova (2014: 283) discusses,

The phenomenon of creating proverb-like formations is quite spread in contemporary English language media. Although these formations are not proverbs, they are built on the basis of paremic structural-semantic models typically with traditional stylistic markers, and express some general ideas often similar to those conveyed by real proverbs.

Thus, given the alleged frequency of appearance of pseudo-proverbs in "English language media", as noted by Konstantinova, and the comedic inclination of *The Office*, it was not completely unexpected to find examples of pseudo-proverbs in the series. The way in which Michael Scott is portrayed contributed to this predictability, especially considering his repeated misuse of proverbs. As a result, the following five cases susceptible to being considered pseudo-proverbs were found:

- 24) MICHAEL SCOTT Blessed be those who sit and wait. (1x5)
- 25) MICHAEL SCOTT Another rule of business is being able to adapt to different situations, yeah? Adapt, react, readapt, apt. Right? (2x4)
- 26) MICHAEL SCOTT In business, image is everything. (2x4)
- 27) MICHAEL SCOTT I told Dwight that there is honour in losing, which as we all know is completely ridiculous. (2x6)

28) MICHAEL SCOTT Pam, productivity starts with patience and determination (3x5)

In example 24, Michael tries to justify his inaction in tackling a problem by making a statement that is reminiscent of the Beatitudes found in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. This is done using the formula "blessed be those...", which causes his sentence to be perceived by the audience as a proverb. There are two main reasons why this happens: on the one hand, the Bible is widely acknowledged as one of the main sources for proverbs in the Western world (Mieder 2004: 11-12; Paczolay 2005: 75; Piirainen 2005: 70); on the other hand, dozens of proverbs exist that follow ready-made structures. Some examples of this are proverbs articulated around the formulae "'Better X than Y,' 'Like X, like Y,' 'No X without Y,' 'One X doesn't make a Y,' 'If X, then Y,'" (Mieder 2004: 6). In the case of the phrase used in Michael's statement "blessed be...", we find proverbs such as "blessed are the dead that the rain rains on" (Mieder et al. 1996: 70) or "blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall never be disappointed" (Mieder et al. 1996: 55). However, proverbs most frequently advocate the opposite of Michael's suggestion, as in the cases of "he who hesitates is lost" (Mieder et al. 1996: 299) or "strike while the iron is hot" (Mieder et al. 1996: 334), among others. These proverbs favour the idea of having an active approach to conflict, albeit with more specific uses. Moreover, and under the consideration that incongruity contributes to humour, the fact that Michael comes up with a proverb-like statement that challenges this pervasive proverbial precept further enhances the comical character of his remark.

In example 25, Michael is trying to use his experience to teach Ryan Howard, his protégé, about the particulars of entrepreneurship. To do this, he uses the sentence "Adapt, react, readapt, apt", which has some similarities to the "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome" internet meme, although, remarkably, *The Office* episode predates the popularisation of the meme by almost 12 years.⁶ Phraseological coincidences aside, Michael's statement has a certain proverbial character due to the poetic figures of repetition included in it with the alliteration in "react, readapt" and the internal rhyme in "adapt, [...] readapt, apt". As is known, proverbs sometimes include such stylistic devices (Villers 2022), which make them memorisable and contribute to their reproducibility. Yet, Michael's intentions to produce a proverbial statement, or one that passes as such, is truncated by the fact that the logical sequencing of the elements he chooses is interrupted by the final addition of an adjective after a string of three verbs. This demonstrates his lack of syntactic and grammatical awareness and causes the humorous character of the sentence, again as an overlap of the superiority and incongruity theories of humour (Morreall 2009: 4-15).

Example 26 in which Michael utters a seemingly proverbial statement takes place in the same episode as the previous example and in the same context. In this case, Michael's business lesson is "image is everything". There are various reasons why this statement resembles a proverb, particularly its conciseness and dogmatism. Additionally, it shows a parallelism with the well-known proverb "money isn't everything" (Mieder et al. 1996: 417), which could be aptly applied to the topic Michael is dealing with, due to the evident connection between the noun 'money' and the concept of 'business'. Yet, in a typically Michael Scott manner, rather than looking into the core of the issue, he provides a superficial outlook, focusing on external appearances.

Example 27, "there is honour in losing", is of special interest because Michael himself acknowledges its absurdity, which enhances the comedic effect. The statement is articulated around the noun *honour*, which is found in various proverbs such as "a prophet is not without honour save in his own country" (Mieder et al. 1996: 487), "the post of honour is the post of danger" (Speake 2015: 154), or "there is honour among thieves" (Mieder et al. 1996: 307). The reason it is considered to be used humorously is that, contrary to what Michael promotes, he does not usually take defeat

⁶ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/improvise-adapt-overcome>

honourably and will find a way to prevail at any cost. Consequently, in another example of incongruous humour, he preaches what he does not practise, admitting the fallacious character of his proverb-like statement. All the same, he still resorts to a proverb-like expression to take advantage of the authority that proverbs grant in conversation to persuade Dwight, exemplifying why one may use such discursive items.

The last example, i.e., 28, of a sentence that may be analysed in terms of its perceived similarities to proverbs is “productivity starts with patience and determination.” Again, Michael articulates a succinct and dogmatic sentence, with a straightforward syntax and some repetition of sounds. In this case, the humour of the statement lies in the fact that Michael’s office is notorious for its lack of productivity. On the other hand, this unproductivity is one of the main reasons that make the series effective as a comedy, as the inefficient practices of the employees create many of the comical situations, which, nonetheless, do not prevent the successfulness of the Scranton branch of Dunder Mifflin, as mentioned above. Finally, and similarly to what was observed in the previous example, Michael’s impatience is remarkable and it repeatedly causes him to get in trouble. For this reason, the fact that he considers patience to be one of the most important attributes for productivity is, again, incongruent with his own character and enhances the irony in the situation, causing the humorousness of his statement.

As has been shown, there are various examples in which Michael resorts to proverb-like statements to reinforce the authority of his comments as the office boss. To do this, he uses different elements that are readily associated with well-known proverbs such as the use of recurring stylistic devices, proverbial structures, vocabulary or ideas. In relation to the humorous effect these have, they most frequently relate to the incongruity theory of humour since he advocates ideas and attitudes that are the opposite of what his character embodies.

3. Conclusion

Proverbs are discursive devices associated with tradition and considered by many to be destined to fall into disuse. Generally, speakers use proverbs for the conversational advantage they obtain due to the generalised perception of proverbs as unquestionable truths. However, as was the intention of this paper to prove, and as shown in the works of other scholars published in this journal (Vargha & Litovkina 2013; Litovkina 2017), proverbs are quite appropriate for their use with humorous intentions. In the case of fiction, and particularly television series, writers seem to be inclined to include so-called ‘anti-proverbs’, i.e., modified proverbs, as well as, to a lesser extent, ‘pseudo-proverb’, i.e., invented proverb-like statements, to achieve their comedic purposes.

We have analysed *The Office* with respect to its creative use of proverbs, as it is one of the most acclaimed comedy series in the 21st century. Within the show, its main protagonist in the first seven seasons, Michael Scott, emerges as an extremely charismatic character who has an inclination to the use of proverbs. Regarding this use of proverbs by Michael, it is interesting that it is normally a non-standard use. Therefore, apart from the various cases of canonical proverbs reproduced at the beginning of this paper, Michael often modifies proverbs or invents statements that resemble proverbs with the intention of supporting his ideas or attitudes. The effect that this has is a contribution to the series’ humour.

These uses of paremias, despite being powerful communication and comedic practices, depend on the audience’s competence to produce the effect expected by the writers of the show. On the one hand, anti-proverbs depend on them being identified as references to existing canonical paremias in order to cause a comedic effect; on the other hand, Michael’s pseudo-proverbs may only be expected

to have a humorous effect in contraposition to his own characterisation as devised by the creators of the series. As a result, the introduction of paremias and seemingly paremiological statements as a frequent communicative and comic device in the show relates, most frequently, to the incongruity theory of humour.

To sum up, Michael Scott's use of proverbs seems to be a deliberate choice by scriptwriters, who employ it to shape the character, using this linguistic and cultural item for comic relief, following a practice that has a long tradition and whose origin in narratology may be traced to the character of Sancho in *Don Quixote* (Cervantes Saavedra 2004).

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