

Puns and nicknames of political figures in Hong Kong: A linguistic humor study

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This paper presents a small corpus study of humor, and strategies used for rendering humor in nicknames of political figures in Hong Kong. Three questions are developed to examine the humor in nicknames: what are the patterns in nicknames of political figures? What linguistic devices do nicknaming practices make use of to inject comical effects to nicknames? And finally, how is humor derived from the interaction between patterns and the use of linguistic devices?

Data have been collected from newspapers, political satires, online political commentaries and programs, and personal interviews. Four patterns that are found to have been used in the nicknames are: prefixation, suffixation, duplication and pun application; and four linguistic devices that are identified in constructing humor are: malapropism, use of Cantonese colloquial expressions, use of characters with bad connotations, sarcasm and anachronism.

This paper proposes that the interaction between different patterns and the various uses of linguistic devices result in incongruity between nicknames and formal names, and through incongruity humor is derived. First, the number of characters is not limited and family names can be omitted, showing a flexible way of naming. Second, the position of the family name can be moved, showing the tendency of de-emphasizing the importance of the family in nicknaming. Third, the use of colloquial expressions serves as a sharp contrast to formal language on the lexical level. Fourth, sarcasm, anachronism and words with negative connotations are used as a means of scapegoating, humiliation and even protest or dissent against the people of derision.

All these nicknaming practices work in the near opposite direction from formal naming. As a result, incongruity and humor are generated.