Academic Journal of Modern Philology

ISSN 2299–7164
Vol. 27 (2025)
143–163

Eryk Hajndrych
Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Faculty of Linguistics
ehajndrych@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-8961-4177

Delving into the Whimsical Charm of Tainan: A Linguistic Landscape Analysis of Humorous Street Signage That Goes Beyond Homophony

Abstract

This study explores the humorous street signage that goes beyond homophony by investigating Tainan, a city in southern Taiwan. Drawing on a linguistic landscape approach, a total of 173 images were analysed to explore the functions of humour in Tainan's street signage. Findings suggest that while most of the humorous street signage is created based on homophones, there are still other types of humorous street signage created via the use of certain characters, compounding, classifiers, denominalisation, allusion, analogy, speech acts, onomatopoeias, and self-deprecation. It is concluded that humour in Tainan can be conceived of as a challenge to established systems of power, fostering a sense of personal liberty among the populace.

Keywords: humour, linguistic landscape, signage, Tainan, Taiwan

Introduction

Tainan, situated in the southwestern part of Taiwan, is recognised as the oldest city in the country. It is renowned for its temples, architectural heritage and traditional culinary delicacies. The rich historical tapestry and vibrant folk culture of Tainan serve as a bridge, seamlessly integrating tradition and modernity. Based on my two-month fieldwork in Tainan during the summer of 2024, I found that most humorous street signage in the city relies on homophony, which reflects what Bakhtin ([1965] 1984) terms the "linguistic carnivalesque," serving as a means to resist authority and promote a sense of liberation among urban dwellers (Hajndrych 2025, in press). Beyond homophony, this study examines other types of humorous street signage in Tainan, exploring how they convey sociocultural meanings and contribute to the city's whimsical charm.

doi: 10.34616/ajmp.2025.27.10

This study draws upon linguistic landscape (LL) approaches, which have been used in examining public signage in various parts of the world, including signage in Tokyo's gay strict (Baudinette 2017, 2018) and in a homonormative space, *i.e.* Wilton Drive in Wilton Manors, Florida (Motschenbacher 2020, 2023), multilingualism reflected in the signage in Taiwan (Ho, Khng, and Iûⁿ 2018) and in the London Borough of Ealing (Tusk 2024), etc. The objective of linguistic landscape studies is to "describe and identify systematic patterns of the presence and absence of languages in public spaces" as well as "to understand the motives, pressures, ideologies, reactions and decision making of people regarding the creation of LL in its varied forms" (Shohamy and Ben-Rafael 2015: 1).

In this study, the linguistic landscape framework is employed not merely as a tool for cataloguing signage, but as a lens through which the sociocultural meanings embedded in public signage can be explored. By analysing humorous street signage, the research aims to reveal the distinctive character of Tainan society, emphasising how humour functions as a vehicle for expressing local identity, social norms, and collective creativity. In addition to analysing their sociocultural meanings, the study also considers the systematic patterns in which different types of humorous signage appear across the city, in line with the objectives of linguistic landscape research. In doing so, this study builds upon and extends traditional linguistic landscape research, which often focuses on language presence and multilingualism, by highlighting the dynamic relationship between language, humour, and the city's sociocultural context.

Database

A total of 173 images of humorous street signage were collected in Tainan during the months of August and September 2024, forming a comprehensive linguistic landscape of the city. The study corpus includes both Mandarin and Taiwanese Hokkien data. Mandarin expressions are presented with Chinese characters and rendered in 漢語拼音 *Hànyǔ Pīnyīn* with tone marks. Taiwanese Hokkien expressions are presented in Taiwanese Han characters and rendered using the 臺灣臺語羅馬字拼音方案*Tâi-uân Tâi-gí Lô-má-jī Phing-im Hong-àn* system, commonly known as 臺羅 *Tâi-lô*, also with tone marks.

Types of Humorous Signage

Based on the database provided, seven types of humorous street signage have been identified: created via the use of specific characters (3.1), compounding (3.2), classifiers (3.3), allusion (3.4), speech acts (3.5), onomatopoeias (3.6), and self-deprecation (3.7). Since the street signage in Tainan is particularly unique, this categorisation is data-driven rather than adopted from existing literature, as classifications based primarily on Western contexts cannot fully capture the distinctiveness of Tainan's signage.

Specific Characters

It has been observed that there are certain characters which are used with great frequency in reference to similar products or services. An intriguing example of this can be observed in the utilisation of the character 夾 *jiá*, which is used to denote the act of fastening two objects together.

Fig. 1(a) 熊愛夾 *xióng-ài-jiá*[1]

Fig. 1(b) 豪祥夾 *háo-xiáng-jiá*

Fig. 1(c) 粉愛夾 *fěn-ài-jiá*

Fig. 1(d) 萬物皆可夾 *wàn-wù-jiē-kě-jiá*

Fig. 1(e) 夾不丸 *jiá-bù-wán*

Fig. 1(f) 夾鬼夾怪 *jiá-guǐ-jiá-guài*

As demonstrated by the above examples, all the signboards contain the character 夾, and they are all names of claw machine shops. Most of the signboard names convey the meanings that there are an abundance of items available in the claw machines, or that they are intended for individuals who are addicted to playing a claw machine. The gameplay of a claw machine involves the utilisation of a joystick or other control mechanism to position the claw over the desired prize, subsequently lowering it to enable the claw to grasp and deposit the prize into the chute. This recreational pursuit holds a certain allure for many individuals.

As illustrated in Fig. 1(a)–1(c), it is evident that all the shop names 熊愛夾, 豪祥夾, and 粉愛夾 contain the character 夾. Of particular interest is the observation that 熊愛 *xióng-ài* is a homophone with the Taiwanese Hokkien 常愛 *siông ài*. This expression signifies the concept of profound affection for an activity. The cartoon bears displayed in Fig. 1(a) 熊愛夾 *xióng-ài-jiá* also echoes the phrase 熊 *xióng* "bear." While this signboard can mean "the bear loves to claw," it also communicates the meaning of "being addicted to playing a claw machine." In Fig. 1(b) 豪祥夾 *háo-xiáng-jiá* and 1(c) 粉愛夾 *fěn-ài-jiá*, on the other hand, the homophonous nature of 豪祥 *háo-xiáng* and 粉愛 *fěn-ài* with 好想 *hǎo-xiǎng* "to want to" and 很愛 *hěn-ài* "to love to" is also evident, with both signboards conveying a similar meaning. In Fig. 1(c) 粉愛夾 *fěn-ài-jiá*, moreover, the use of 粉 *fěn* rather than 很 *hěn* "very" as a modifier for the verb serves to showcase accented Mandarin, with the intention of eliciting humour and reinforcing ingroup

1 All images included in this study were collected by the author in Tainan in August and September 2024, with the exception of Fig. 1(l), which was taken in Poland. Copyright for all images is held by the author.

solidarity. This usage originates from the cross-dressing character Dong Yuehua (董月花), portrayed by entertainer Alex Dung (董至成), who appeared in early Taiwanese variety shows. In his performances, the fictional character often spoke with a strong regional accent, using phrases such as: 中壢埔心土雞，又油又香，不會粉膩 *"Free-range chicken from Puxin, Chungli is oily, fragrant, and not fěn greasy!"* To make the character more authentic and representative of a Hakka woman from Puxin, Chungli, Dung deliberately incorporated this local term. This not only enhanced the character's regional charm and linguistic identity, but also influenced how Taiwanese audiences perceived and imitated the phrase, turning it into a humorous and widely recognised catchphrase.

Referring to Fig. 1(d) 萬物皆可夾 *wàn-wù-jiē-kě-jiá* and 1(e) 夾不丸 *jiá-bù-wán*, it is evident that the designated names of the claw machine stores signify an assortment of items at one's disposal. In Fig. 1(d), the name 萬物皆可夾 literally means "all items are obtainable (in the claw machines)." Conversely, in Fig. 1(e), the name 夾不丸 *jiá-bù-wán* is a homophone of 夾不完 *jiá-bù-wán*, which literally implies that there are so many items available that it is impossible to "claw" all of them. Finally, 夾鬼夾怪 *jiá-guǐ-jiá-guài*, as in Fig. 1(f), not only contains two instances of 夾, but it is also a homophone with a negative Taiwanese Hokkien formulaic expression 假鬼假怪 *ké-kúi-ké-kuài*. Literally, this translates to "to dress up as ghosts and spirits to awe people," yet alternatively, it can be construed as "to deceive people" or "to scam." While the store name does not convey any implied messages as in previous examples, it communicates a sense of humour inspired by the local language, which may further elicit a knowing smile within those speaking Taiwanese Hokkien.

As Tainan does not currently possess a mass rapid transit system, akin to those operating in other major Taiwanese cities, scooter rental services represent a favoured mode of transportation for tourists from other cities. Consequently, a significant number of scooter rental establishments can be found in close proximity to Tainan Train Station. As demonstrated by the following examples, all the signboards contain the character 騎 *qí* "to ride."

Fig. 1(g) 載憶騎 *zài-yì-qí*

Fig. 1(h) 騎車趣 *qí-chē-qù*

Fig. 1(i) Fun心騎 *fun-xīn-qí*

The scooter rental shops in Fig. 1(g)–1(i) are located in close proximity to Tainan Train Station, and all of them utilise the character 騎 "to ride" in their nomenclature, forming names that are designed to appeal to potential customers. In Fig. 1(g), 載憶騎 *zài-yì-qí* incorporates not only 騎 "to ride," but also 憶 "memory" and 載 "to carry someone via a vehicle." The name of the shop is also the homophone of 在一起 *zài-yì-qǐ* "to be together," which is a playful implication that the scooter rental shop is a place where couples can rent a scooter and create memories while exploring Tainan. In Fig. 1(h), 騎車趣 *qí-chē-qù* is a homophone of 騎車去 *qí-chē-qù* "let's have a ride." The character 趣 "fun" further reinforces the notion that scooter riding in Tainan is enjoyable. In Fig. 1(i), Fun心騎 *fun-xīn-qí* sounds like 放心騎 *fàng-xīn-qí* "to ride without worry," suggesting a sense of carefree amusement in scooter riding in Tainan. In general, tourists can immediately comprehend the service offered by shops when they visually encounter the character 騎 "to ride," which encourages them to opt for scooter riding as a means of exploring Tainan. Furthermore, the creativity exhibited by shop owners in naming their establishments has a profound impact on tourists from other cities.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, and by extension other cities in Taiwan, Thai restaurants are designated by the character 泰 *tài*, meaning "Thai". While the creation of Thai restaurant names in Taiwan is, to a great extent, predicated on the use of this particular character, the names are not without creativity, with some being presented in Thai script.

Fig. 1(j) 小泰飽 *xiǎo-tài-bǎo*

Fig. 1(k) 魚泰泰 *yú-tài-tài*

In Fig. 1(j), 小泰飽 *xiǎo-tài-bǎo* "lit. small-Thai-full" is a homophone with 小太保 *xiǎo-tài-bǎo* "little hooligan," with 泰 "Thai" serving to indicate the restaurant is of Thai origin and 飽 "full" denoting the ample portion of food provided. In Fig. 1(k), 魚泰泰 *yú-tài-tài* "fish-Thai-Thai" is a homophone with 余太太 *yú-tài-tai* "Mrs. Yu," with 泰 "Thai" indicating that the restaurant specialises in Thai cuisine and 魚 "fish" suggesting the type of food available. It is interesting to note that in Figure 1(k), the name of the restaurant is presented in the Latin alphabet, "Pla Thai Thai," but with a font design that resembles Thai script. The phenomenon of using fonts similar to Thai script on signage to identify Thai establishments is not unique to Tainan; it has also been observed in the historic district of Toruń, a city situated along the Vistula River in north-central Poland. As evidenced in Fig. 1(l), the capital of Thailand, Bangkok, is

used as a designation that denotes the restaurant as a Thai restaurant. The name is also presented in a Thai script-like font, similar to the previous example.

Fig. 1(l)[2]

Not surprisingly, the use of English in Thai script is also found in Thailand (Huebner 2006). Sloboda (2024) has further noted that in many countries, signs are often inscribed in scripts where the languages utilised for the signs deviate from conventional orthographies. A notable example of this phenomenon can be observed in cases such as Chinese in Tibetan script in China (Cabras 2024), German in Urdu script in Germany (Peukert 2015), and Russian in Latin script in Uzbekistan (Pavlenko 2009).

In conclusion, it is evident that the incorporation of specific characters (夾 *jiá*, 騎 *qí* or 泰 *tài*) into the signboards serves to elucidate the functions of the establishments or the services they provide. The distinctive meanings of these characters enable immediate recognition of the services offered without the need for explicit labelling. The creativity of the names also makes a positive impression on guests, diners, or customers in an entertaining and involving manner.

Compounding

The process of compounding involves the combination of two separate words to form a new word. English compounds may be derived from a variety of parts of speech, with the following potential combinations: noun + noun, noun + *-ing* form, *-ing* form + noun, verb + noun, adjective + noun, adjective + *-ing* form, past particle + noun, noun + past particle, noun + adjective, adverb + past particle, and adverb + *-ing* form (Hewings 2007: 38–40). Nevertheless, given the significant typological divergence between Indo-European languages and Mandarin Chinese (a Sinitic language), it is to be expected that the application of the above classification of compounds may give rise to considerable debate. Packard (2000: 81), for instance, argues that compounding is a minor feature in Chinese, with "bound root words," meaning

2 Fig. 1(l) was photographed by the author in Toruń, Poland, in October 2024.

complex words containing at least one bound root, constituting the primary product of word formation. This view contrasts with that of many prominent Chinese linguists, such as Chao (2011), who maintains that only words containing at least one bound constituent qualify as compounds. Nevertheless, I have found that a compound consisting of two nouns that have no semantic correlation may result in a humorous effect. This humour would primarily arise from the awkwardness and incongruity of the new compound, as illustrated by the following examples.

Fig. 2(a) 紅茶幫 *hóng-chá-bāng*

Fig. 2(b) 茶客棧 *chá-kè-zhàn*

Fig. 2(c) 洗鞋專科 *xǐ-xié-zhuān-kē*

Fig. 2(d) 燒肉工場 *shāo-ròu-gōng-chǎng*

Fig. 2(e) 眼鏡俱樂部 *yǎn-jìng-jù-lè-bù*

All of the names of the establishments depicted in Fig. 2(a)–2(e) are compounds made up of two nouns which are semantically unrelated. In Fig. 2(a), 紅茶幫 *hóng-chá-bāng* "black tea gang" is the name for a beverage shop. In Fig. 2(b), 茶客棧 *chá-kè-zhàn* "tea guesthouse" is also the name for a beverage shop. Fig. 2(c) features 洗鞋專科 *xǐ-xié-zhuān-kē*, which translates to "shoe-washing clinic department." In this case, the name refers to a shop offering shoe-cleaning and bag-cleaning services. Fig. 2(d) illustrates 燒肉工場 *shāo-ròu-gōng-chǎng* "roasted meat factory," which is a barbecue restaurant. Finally, Fig. 2(e) shows 眼鏡俱樂部 *yǎn-jìng-jù-lè-bù* "glasses club," which is an optician's. The nomenclature of these establishments unambiguously delineates the nature of the services they offer. However, a notable aspect of their designation is the incorporation of humour, which arises from the incongruity of two nouns that are semantically disparate. For example, in 紅茶幫 "black tea gang", the noun 紅茶 "black tea" refers to a beverage, while 幫 "gang" denotes a social group or organisation, creating a humorous clash between a drink and a human collective. In 茶客棧 "tea guesthouse," 茶 "tea" is a drink, whereas 客棧 "guesthouse" signifies a lodging place, combining unrelated categories of beverage and accommodation. In 洗鞋專科 "shoe-washing clinic department," 洗鞋 "shoe washing" is a service, and 專科 "clinic department" relates to medical specialities, producing a playful contrast between cleaning shoes and healthcare. 燒肉工場 "roasted meat factory" pairs 燒肉 "roasted meat" with 工場 "factory," a term typically associated with

industrial manufacturing, thus blending food and industry in an amusing way. Lastly, 眼鏡俱樂部 "glasses club" unites 眼鏡 "glasses" as an object with 俱樂部 "club", a social organisation, resulting in a quirky and unexpected combination. In brief, the conflict within the internal structure of the compounds is communicated as amusement, which is likely to make an impression on potential customers or guests.

Classifiers

In a comparative analysis of Polish and Chinese, Plinta (2015) advances the argument that the utilisation of classifiers (or measure words) is obligatory in Chinese. In Polish, the use of either *jedna kostka masła* "one cube of butter" or *jedno masło* "one butter" is equally acceptable. In contrast, in Chinese, the use of classifiers is mandatory, resulting in expressions such as 一盒黃油 *yī-hé-huáng-yóu* "one cube of butter." Utilising merely 一黃油 *yī-huáng-yóu* "one butter" constitutes a grammatical error.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, I have also observed that the character 間 *jiān*, a classifier for a room or an interval, is also applied in the creation of signboards.

Fig. 3(a) 這一間造型剪髮
zhè-yī-jiān-zào-xíng-jiǎn-fǎ

Fig. 3(b) 有間小館
yǒu-jiān-xiǎo-guǎn

Fig. 3(c) 一間冬瓜茶
yī-jiān-dōng-guā-chá

In Fig. 3(a), the hair salon is directly called 這一間造型剪髮 *zhè-yī-jiān-zào-xíng-jiǎn-fǎ* "lit. this-one-classifier-style-cut-hair," which literally translates to "this stylist hair salon." In Fig. 3(b), the local bistro is directly called 有間小館 *yǒu-jiān-xiǎo-guǎn* "lit. have-classifier-small-bistro", meaning "there is a small bistro." Finally, in Fig. 3(c), the stall selling sweetened white gourd drinks is directly called 一間冬瓜茶 *yī-jiān-dōng-guā-chá* "lit. one-classifier-winter-melon-tea; a shop of sweetened white gourd drink." The act of refraining from naming a specific establishment, whether it be a hair salon, a local bistro, or a beverage stall, and using instead a generic appellation, may be perceived by potential customers as a modest or notably unconventional choice. This unexpected deviation from normative branding practices can, as a result, evoke a humorous response.

In addition to the classifier 間 *jiān*, other classifiers such as 個 *ge* (the generic classifier for many nouns) and 家 *jiā* (a classifier for gathering of people or establishments) are also used in the naming of the establishments.

Fig. 3(d) 這個甘草芭樂 *zhè-ge-gān-cǎo-bā-lè*

Fig. 3(e) 就是這家可愛的店 *jiù-shì-zhè-jiā-kě-ài-de-diàn*

Fig. 3(d) illustrates use of 這個甘草芭樂 *zhè-ge-gān-cǎo-bā-lè* "lit. this-classifier-liquorice-guava; this liquorice guava (simply liquorice guava)" in the designation of a store specialising in beverages and desserts made with guava. In Fig. 3(e), 就是這家可愛的店 *jiù-shì-zhè-jiā-kě-ài-de-diàn* "lit. exactly-be-this-classifier-cute-shop; exactly this lovely shop (nothing but this lovely shop/just this lovely shop)" written on the yellow lanterns is used as the name for a shop selling small trinkets. As argued by Jiang (2017), architecture represents a pivotal symbol of Chinese civilisation, with Chinese characters frequently deriving from concepts associated with buildings and structures. It is evident that the incorporation of classifiers into the designations of commercial establishments diminishes their distinctiveness. This is due to the public's perception of the classifiers, which serves to divert the attention of guests or customers from the unique characteristics of the establishment. As a result, the focus of guests or customers is redirected towards what can be anticipated from the establishment, such as the services or products offered.

Allusion

In analysing the use of humour and irony in internet memes showcasing the leaders of Russia and China, Chen and Chornyi (2024) observe that an image macro employing allusion to the character of Hannibal Lecter, the serial killer from the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, is connected to Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, the humour and irony of a panel meme depicting Xi Jinping's facial expressions of joy and anger upon seeing Pui Pui Molcars and their subsequent depiction as a column of tanks, respectively, are also based on the allusion to the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, the creation of some humorous signboards is also based on allusion. Additionally, some signboards have further reflected the localness of Tainan, thus contributing to the city's unique linguistic and cultural identity.

Fig. 4(a) 餵公子吃餅 *wèi-gōng-zǐ-chī-bǐng*

Fig. 4(b) 聞香下馬 *wén-xiāng-xià-mǎ*

As illustrated in Fig. 4(a), the name of the commercial establishment is 餵公子吃餅 *wèi-gōng-zǐ-chī-bǐng*, which signifies "to feed this son of nobility big pieces flatbread." This is a reference to an actor's well-known lines in a 1994 Hong Kong farce entitled *Hail the Judge* (film title in Taiwan: 九品芝麻官) by Stephen Chow (周星馳), of whom the style of 無厘頭 *wúlítóu* "nonsense" has become a preferred humour type among middle-class Taiwanese (Chen 2016, 2017) and gay Taiwanese men (Chen 2022). The familiarity of the Taiwanese populace with the lines from Stephen Chow's farces ensures the comprehension of the humour embedded within the signboard, which is an establishment selling all kinds of paste pancakes (餅 *bǐng* "flatbread, pancakes, cookies"), and thus the name of the shop is a humorous echo of the products it sells or functioning as a rhetorical practice of 港台 *Gǎng-Tái* sociocultural enregisterment[3]. In Fig. 4(b), the name of the snack bar is 聞香下馬 *wén-xiāng-xià-mǎ*, which translates as "to dismount from the horse when smelling something nice". This is an allusion to a dismounting stele at Tainan's Confucian temple, reading in Chinese (文武官員軍民人等至此下馬 *wén-wǔ-guān-yuán-jūn-mín-rén-děng-zhì-cǐ-xià-mǎ*) and Manchurian (*bithe coohai hafasa cooha irgen i urse ubade jifi morin ci ebu*) "civil and military officials, soldiers and citizens, all dismount from their horses here" (Fig. 4[c] and 4[d]).

Fig. 4(c)

Fig. 4(d)

3 Agha (2007: 81) points out that "enregisterment" is a process whereby performable signs, such as language forms or behaviours, are recognised by a community and categorised into distinct semiotic registers bearing different social values. In other words, certain language forms or signs are identified by particular social groups and ascribed specific social or cultural meanings, as exemplified by Fig. 4(a), which originates from a Hong Kong farce and has become a source of humour in Taiwan.

In ancient times, the dismounting stele indicated the nearest point at which riders should dismount horses or exit vehicles in order to show proper respect. While individuals in ancient times were expected to dismount horses or exit vehicles to show respect to the Confucian temple, modern people in Tainan, as the name of the snack bar suggests, are expected to do the same when smelling the cuisines of the snack bar. The signboard humorously alludes to the Confucian temple's dismounting stele, thereby implying the superior quality of the cuisines served at the snack bar. Those born in Tainan must be acquainted with the dismounting stele and may find immediate entertainment in the creativity of the signboard, the humour of which serves to reinforce ingroup solidarity.

Speech Acts

According to the theories proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1975), speech acts can be categorised into different subcategories. Austin introduces three constituent elements in analysing an utterance: *the locutionary act*, *the illocutionary act*, and *the perlocutionary act*. Searle has further categorised the illocutionary acts into five subcategories: *representatives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declarations*.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, a significant number of signboards have been observed to utilise illocutionary speech acts for the purpose of humour, with the intention of making an impression on potential customers or guests.

Fig. 5(a) 廚房有雞 *chú-fáng-yǒu-jī*

Fig. 5(b) 武灰鍋 *wǔ-huī-guō*

The signboards depicted in Fig. 5(a) and 5(b) have been created through the utilisation of representatives. As defined by Searle, "The point or purpose of the members of the representative class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition" (1975: 354). Fig. 5(a) illustrates the name of the restaurant, 廚房有雞 "lit. kitchen-have-chicken," which is the locative construction formed by the use of the word 有 *yǒu* "to have." In Fig. 5(b), we observe that the name of the restaurant is 武灰鍋 *wǔ-huī-guō*, which is a homophone with the Taiwanese Hokkien phrase 有火鍋 *ū hué-ko* "lit. have-fire-pot." Here, the word 有 *ū* "to have" is used to form the existential construction (see also Fig. 3[b]). The distinction between the two *yǒu*-constructions can be elucidated as follows: in the former, the subject is a locative, whereas in the latter, *yǒu* is at the initial position of the sentence (Fang and Lin 2008). As the representatives articulate the speaker's perspective, they can also, among other functions, express diagnoses, predictions, notifications, confessions or denials,

thus meriting the designation of "assertives" (Clark 1996: 134). Correspondingly, the depicted signboards can be regarded as public notifications of the availability of chickens and hotpots in the restaurants.

As representatives (or assertive illocutionary acts) refer to speech acts where the speaker asserts the truth value of a statement, the following four examples can also be viewed as representatives stating an ongoing event associated with cooking to be true.

Fig. 5(c) 男哥煮麵
nán-gē-zhǔ-miàn

Fig. 5(d) 老吳狠炒
lǎo-wǔ-hěn-chǎo

Fig. 5(e) 蚵董烤蚵
kè-dǒng-kǎo-kè

As illustrated in Fig. 5(c)–5(e), all the signboards contain four characters and are in a structure of "subject + predicate." For example, 男哥煮麵 *nán-gē-zhǔ-miàn* signifies "Brother Nan is cooking noodles" (Fig. 5[c]), while 老吳狠炒 *lǎo-wǔ-hěn-chǎo* denotes "Old Wu is stir-frying vigorously" (Fig. 5[d]). Additionally, 蚵董烤蚵 *kè-dǒng-kǎo-kè*, representing the act of "Director Ke roasting oysters," is depicted in Fig. 5(e). The signboards all assert that the kitchen staff are currently engaged in culinary activities, thereby signifying that the restaurants are now offering sustenance to their clientele. Using cooking verbs, such as 煮 *zhǔ* "to poach, to boil," 炒 *chǎo* "to fry," and 烤 *kǎo* "to roast, to bake," alludes to the culinary events transpiring in the restaurants at this moment. The signboards are created via short four-character nonformulaic expressions to describe rather complex and long cooking processes. While such expressions are found for the purpose of asserting sexual modernity and creating humour in Taiwanese queer discourse (Chen 2022), they can also be viewed as assertive illocutionary acts that simply engender humour, as those who encounter the signboards may commence imagining what is occurring in the restaurants at the moment.

In addition to the aforementioned, it is notable that some signboards in the linguistic landscape of Tainan utilise representatives to articulate one's present emotional or psychological states, thereby facilitating humour and the creation of impressions.

Fig. 5(f) 超派 *chāo-pài*

Fig. 5(g) 皮皮挫*pí-pí-cuò*

The names of the commercial establishments, 超派 *chāo-pài* (Fig. 5[f]) and 皮皮挫 *pí-pí-cuò* (Fig. 5[g]), are inspired by Taiwanese Hokkien, as they sound like 超 *chāo* "super" (Mandarin) + 歹 *pháinn* "fierce" (Taiwanese Hokkien) and 啤啤掣 *phi̍h phi̍h tshuah* "to tremble uncontrollably from fear or cold" (Taiwanese Hokkien), respectively. The appellations of the commercial establishments represent the emotional or psychological states of a person. Given that the representatives are associated with negative emotional or psychological states of a person and are inspired by frequent daily colloquial expressions in Taiwanese Hokkien, customers or guests may feel familiar and a sense of closeness, and thus a knowing smile may be evoked. More precisely, the humour in these signboards seems to arise from the pleasure or relief of recognising one's own language-culture, as it is enregistered in these shop names, and from the resulting sense of belonging they help to construct.

Directives are also observed, albeit exclusively in the signage of snack bars and restaurants, a phenomenon that is not unexpected. According to Searle, directives are "attempts […] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (1975: 355). Accordingly, the use of directives serves to initiate an invitation, with the illocutionary point being that customers or guests will perform a future action – namely, dine in the snack bars or restaurants.

Fig. 5(h) 宸記吃吃看外省麵 *chén-jì-chī-chī-kàn-wài-shěng-miàn*

Fig. 5(i) 呷島厂メ乀 *xiá-dǎo-huī*

In Fig. 5(h) and 5(i), the names of the snack bars are 宸記吃吃看外省麵 *chén-jì-chī-chī-kàn-wài-shěng-miàn*, which translates to "The Chen "try and see" noodles from outside the province"[4] and 呷島ㄏㄧㄚˋ *xiá-dǎo-huī*, with the latter being homophonous with the Taiwanese Hokkien 食豆花 *tsia̍h tāu-hue* "eat soybean pudding". Both examples can be viewed as directives to invite people to try their noodles or soybean pudding. The utilisation of an extended expression (Fig. 5[h]) on a signboard is not a common practice, and the employment of Taiwanese Hokkien, coupled with the incorporation of Mandarin phonetic symbols ㄏㄧㄚˋ to transcribe a Taiwanese Hokkien word (Fig. 5[i]), is particularly intriguing. Both features serve to convey a sense of humour and, once again, to express belonging to a very specific sociolinguistic community that claims to embody and constitute the authentic local culture and identity.

It is noteworthy that the character 來 *lái* "to come" is observable in many directives on snack bar or restaurant signage.

Fig. 5(j) 來碗 *lái-wǎn*

Fig. 5(k) 來呷飯 *lái-xiá-fàn*

In Fig. 5(j) and 5(k), the character 來 *lái* "to come" is used to convey an invitation. In Fig. 5(j), 來碗 *lái-wǎn* "lit. come-classifier" is the name of the snack bar specialising in noodle soups. The name (in larger fonts) is followed by 豚骨拉麵 *tún-gǔ-lā-miàn* "pork bone ramen soup" and 紅燒牛肉麵 *hóng-shāo-niú-ròu-miàn* "braised beef noodle soup" (in smaller fonts). The text on the signboard can therefore mean "come and have a bowl of pork bone ramen soup/braised beef noodle soup." In Fig. 5(k), 來呷飯 *lái-xiá-fàn* is homophonous with the Taiwanese Hokkien 來食飯 *lâi tsia̍h-pn̄g* "come and have meal," and is also viewed as an invitation. The use of colloquial invitation expressions may sound approachable and familiar, and may further remind many Taiwanese of the common greeting "Have you eaten yet?" used by older generations (see Robbins 2017).

4 The term 外省 *wàishěng*, literally meaning "outside the province" and implicitly positioning Taiwan as a Chinese province, can be interpreted as "from the Mainland (China)." In Taiwan, this term was originally a neutral geographical and temporal classification. However, with the rise of democratisation and localisation movements, 外省 *wàishěng* and 本省 *běnshěng* "local-born Taiwanese" identities have come under increasing scrutiny and have, at times, become markers of ethnic identity and political orientation. Regardless of the snack bar owner's political stance, what is clear is the intention to emphasise that the noodles served in this place may resemble authentic Mainland Chinese noodles, distinguishing them from locally typical varieties.

In addition to the use of the verb 來 *lái* "to come," the "verb + 起來 *qǐ-lái*" construction also functions as the name of a café. This is analogous to the use of directive illocutionary acts in the formation of names.

Fig. 5(l) 喝起來 *hē-qǐ-lái*

In Fig. 5(l), the name of the café is 喝起來 *hē-qǐ-lái* "lit. drink-rise-come," which can be interpreted as encouraging people to start drinking. According to Shyu, Wang and Lin (2013), the intransitive verb *qǐ-lái* in Mandarin is composed of two lexical verbs: *qǐ* "to rise" and *lái* "to come," together meaning "arise." In addition to being used as a lexical verb, *qǐ-lái* can be attached to another lexical verb to denote directional, inchoative or completive meanings (Shyu, Wang and Lin 2013). In Fig. 5(l), therefore, the name of the café demonstrates the inchoative meaning, which denotes an aspect of a verb expressing the beginning of an action. The name of the café, 喝起來 *hē-qǐ-lái*, carries an inchoative connotation, which, as evidenced by its juxtaposition with the English expression "BOTTOMS_UP," can be interpreted as encouraging individuals to begin consuming alcohol. The utilisation of this name in a café name fosters a sense of familiarity and humour, as it serves as a reminder of the convivial socialising that occurs during the consumption of alcohol.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, I have also observed one instance of street signage associated with commissives, which according to Searle, are "those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker [...] to some future course of action" (1975: 356).

Fig. 5(m) 甲哩秀秀 *jiǎ-lī-xiù-xiù*

Fig. 5(n) 法克 *fǎ-kè*

As seen in Fig. 5(m), the use of a commissive is illustrated by a signboard which shows 甲哩秀秀 *jiǎ-lī-xiù-xiù*, inspired by the Taiwanese Hokkien expression 共你惜惜 *kā lí sioh-sioh*, "We will comfort you". The name of the bar humorously communicates to guests that it is a place where they can find comfort, perhaps through drinking, as evidenced by the Facebook page of the bar: "There is nothing in the world that a glass of alcohol cannot solve, and if there is, then two! Celebrate with a drink, vent your rage with a drink, drown your sorrows with a drink, and find the courage to face your fears with a drink. Drink up and let us comfort you!" (Show Show Bar). The use of the commissive illocutionary act can be viewed as the bar humorously communicating concerns while simultaneously advertising itself.

The subsequent examples showcase the incorporation of the expressives, which according to Searle, are speech acts whose illocutionary point is "to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content" (1975: 356).

In Fig. 5(n), 法克 *fǎ-kè* is the name of a claw machine shop, derived from the English swear word "fuck," which is commonly understood as an abusive form of swearing used to convey a speaker's psychological state (Pinker 2008). The signboard may also be deliberately styled to evoke a sense of urban edginess and to present the shop's offerings as fashionable or trendy. The use of 法克 *fǎ-kè* can be viewed as an expressive illocutionary act. When potential customers pronounce the shop name aloud, they are in effect performing an expressive act themselves, as they playfully enact a taboo expression that conveys irreverence or emotional intensity, while doing so in a stylised and socially acceptable form.

Onomatopoeias

Van Hoey (2022) has identified that Mandarin onomatopoeias are an open class, categorised within a larger class of ideophones (擬態詞 *nǐ-tài-cí* "lit. mimic-appearance-word") as part of the language. Van Hoey further notes that Mandarin onomatopoeias exhibit a high degree of similarity in terms of phonological properties with prosaic words, apart from a small number of exceptions. With regard to

orthography, Van Hoey puts forward the argument that the semantic component "mouth" is a salient indicator of onomatopoeia, despite the fact that this component is also prevalent in the prosaic lexicon.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, evidence has been found for the use of onomatopoeias in the creation of signboards. This observation aligns with the findings of Van Hoey (2022), whereby the semantic component denoting "mouth" is deployed as a visual sign indicative of onomatopoeia.

Fig. 6(a) 咕嚕叫吐司 *gū-lu-jiào-tǔ-sī*

Fig.6(b)Ka喀嚓佰元剪髮*ka-kā-cā-bǎi-yuán-jiǎn-fǎ*

As shown in Fig. 6(a), the name of the establishment is 咕嚕叫吐司 *gū-lu-jiào-tǔ-sī*. While the phrase 吐司 *tǔ-sī* "toast" indicates the commodities sold, the expression 咕嚕 *gū-lu* is an onomatopoeia referring to the sound of the intestines moving in the absence of food. Similarly, the name of the barber shop in Fig. 6(b) is Ka喀嚓佰元剪髮 *ka-kā-cā-bǎi-yuán-jiǎn-fǎ*. The phrase 佰元剪髮 *bǎi-yuán-jiǎn-fǎ* "hundred-dollar-cut-hair", thus, indicates both the price and the service provided. However, the onomatopoeic element 喀嚓 *kā-cā* is particularly noteworthy, as it refers to the sound of scissors cutting. Interestingly, the English expression "Ka" also functions as an onomatopoeia, sharing the same semantic meaning. In both cases, the semantic component "mouth" is used to indicate the expressions 咕嚕 *gū-lu* and 喀嚓 *kā-cā* as onomatopoeias. The utilisation of onomatopoeias in the nomenclature of commercial establishments can be observed in the two cases above. This practice not only reflects customers' or guests' needs when they are hungry, but also evokes the auditory dimension of the service. To be more precise, visualising intestinal sounds in the absence of food, or alternatively, the sound of scissors cutting, has the potential to attract the attention of customers or guests in a light-hearted manner.

Self-Deprecation

The term "self-deprecation" is defined as the act of one individual ridiculing or disparaging himself/herself in the presence of others (Chen 2017). This practice can be classified as a humour type and is often referred to as "self-deprecating humour," "self-denigrating humour," or "self-directed humour." In this context, the speaker utilises a self-deprecating act that threatens his/her own face in order to elicit

laughter and capture the audience's attention. As Chen further argues, the inferiority displayed by the speaker in his/her self-deprecating humour may also communicate a sense of superiority, as the revelation of weakness may imply that the speaker possesses only this particular shortcoming. The employment of self-deprecating humour by the speaker also fosters the creation of a favourable image by demonstrating self-mastery in the face of adversity. Simultaneously, the listener is left perplexed, as the speaker's self-perception remains obscured (Chen 2017: 126–127).

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, the creation of one street signboard is inspired by self-deprecation. The characteristics of self-deprecating humour previously discussed are also observable in this signboard, which belongs to a dessert shop in Tainan.

Fig. 7 臺南之恥 *tái-nán-zhī-chǐ*

In Fig. 7, the name of the dessert shop is 臺南之恥 *tái-nán-zhī-chǐ* "shame of Tainan." This is a manifestation of self-deprecating humour, indicative of the fact that the desserts and beverages on offer in the establishment contain a reduced quantity of sugar, thus contradicting the prevailing public perception that all culinary offerings in Tainan are sweet. In the relevant literature, Wang (2007) and Lee (2015) both acknowledge the historical prevalence of a predilection for sweet tastes among the populace of Tainan, and indeed, the significance of this inclination is emphasised as a hallmark of the city's dietary traditions. In a Facebook post, moreover, the mayor of Tainan, Wei-Che Huang, has made a self-deprecating joke about the city's reputation, noting that tourists from other cities have described Tainan as having a sweet taste, and even the air is said to be sweet (see Huang 2019). The appellation of the dessert shop is notable for its self-deprecating nature, yet it nonetheless conveys in a humorous manner to guests and customers that the desserts and beverages on offer are healthy. It is also a venue for those who prefer less sweet desserts and beverages.

Conclusion

As Pennycook argues, "[shop signboards] are not just semiotic items but also material artefacts of capitalist competition" (2024: 165). A significant proportion of the signboards appear to be designed with the intention of providing entertainment, and it is evident that they are imbued with encoded sociocultural meanings. Pennycook's assertion is evidenced in the motivations and functions of humorous street signage in Tainan, where such signage is perhaps closely tied to the city's historical significance and enduring cultural identity, both of which enable the residents to assert a deeply-rooted and legitimised sense of "Taiwaneseness."

The present study builds on my previous research (Hajndrych 2025, in press), which suggests that the majority of humorous signage is created based on homophony. However, interesting signboards in the streets of Tainan are also created through other linguistic strategies, further illustrating how humour is perceived and potentially "*enregistered*" by local inhabitants as part of their identity work. The linguistic landscape approach also allows us to understand the motivations and decisions behind the creation of humorous street signage, language ideology constructed via the application of the local language (*i.e.* Taiwanese Hokkien), and how people might react to the constructed humour.

In doing so, this study extends the traditional linguistic landscape framework by demonstrating how humorous signage not only reflects language presence but also embodies local identity and social norms, highlighting the dynamic interplay between language, humour, and the sociocultural context of Tainan. While the prevalence of homophony-based humour was expected, the diversity of other linguistic strategies and their role in enregistering local identity was a particularly revealing and somewhat unexpected aspect of the findings, providing new insights into how linguistic landscape studies can account for humour and identity work.

In a nutshell, humorous signboards that reflect local distinctiveness and articulate a sense of Taiwanese cultural identity may serve as understated yet potent mechanisms for contesting dominant power structures. In particular, they challenge the prevailing, largely China-centred discourse that reduces Taiwanese culture to a peripheral or subordinate position. They attest to a Taiwanese city and urban community that possesses a deeply rooted, autonomous, and even playfully assertive sense of identity. In this regard, the proliferation of humorous street signage in Tainan, reflective of the playful disposition of Taiwanese people (Chen 2016, 2017, 2022), lends credence to Douglas's (1968) proposition that humour may operate as a medium through which prevailing sociocultural hierarchies are subverted, thereby fostering a sense of individual liberty and collective agency.

References

Agha, Asif (2007) *Language and Social Relations* (Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language 24). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Austin, John L. (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail ([1965] 1984) [*Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средневековья и Ренессанса. / Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i Renessansa.*] Translated into English by Hélène Iswolsky. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Baudinette, Thomas (2017) "The Spatialisation of Desire in a Japanese Gay District Through Signage." [In:] *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*. Vol. 16 (3); 500–527.

Baudinette, Thomas (2018) "Cosmopolitan English, Traditional Japanese: Reading Language Desire into the Signage of Tokyo's Gay District." [In:] *Linguistic Landscape: An International Journal*. Vol. 4(3); 238–256.

Cabras, Giulia (2024) "Tibetan in the Linguistic Landscape of Xining (Qinghai Province, Amdo Tibet, Northwest China): A Minority Language in the Context of a Monolingual Language Policy and in a Non-Autonomous Area." [In:] *International Journal of Multilingualism*. Vol. 21 (4); 2048–2072.

Chao, Yuen Ren (2011) *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.

Chen, Li-Chi (2016) "A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of *wúlítóu* 'nonsense' in Taiwanese Verbal Interactions." [In:] *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*. Vol. 12 (1); 53–76.

Chen, Li-Chi (2017) *Taiwanese and Polish Humor: A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Chen, Li-Chi (2022) "Humour and Teasing in Gay Taiwanese Men's Mediatised Interaction on an LGBTQ-Oriented YouTube Entertainment Variety Show." [In:] *Gender and Language*. Vol. 16 (4); 408–434.

Chen, Li-Chi, Ivan Chornyi (2024) "Making Fun of Power: Analyzing Humor and Irony in Memes about Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping." [In:] *Socjolingwistyka*. Vol. 38; 41–61.

Clark, Herbert H. (1996) *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Douglas, Mary (1968) "The Social Control of Cognition: Some factors in Joke Perception". [In:] *Man*. Vol. 3(3); 361–376.

Fang, Huilin, T.-H. Jonah Lin (2008) "The Mandarin *You* Existential: A Verbal Analysis". [In:] *University System of Taiwan Working Papers in Linguistics*. Vol. 4; 43–56.

Hajndrych, Eryk (2025, in press) "Humorous Street Signage in Tainan: A Linguistic Landscape Analysis." [In:] *Socjolingwistyka*. Vol. 39.

Hewings, Martin (2007) *English Pronunciation in Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ho, Hsin-Han, Pôetek Khng, Ún-Giân Iû^{n} (2018) *Khòa^{n} Khan-Páng: Guǎnggào Zhāopái-de Táiyǔ Dàxuéwèn* [Investigating Signboards: Taiwanese Hokkien in Advertising Signboards]. Taipei: Avanguard Publishing House.

Huang, Wei-Che (2019) "The Sweetness of Tainan." Facebook post. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15qEbnCR61/ on June 20, 2025.

Huebner, Thom (2006) "Bangkok's Linguistic Landscapes: Environmental Print, Codemixing and Language Change." [In:] Durk Gorter (ed.) *Linguistic Landscape: A New Approach to Multilingualism*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters; 31–51.

Jiang, Song (2017) *The Semantics of Chinese Classifiers and Linguistic Relativity*. New York, NY/London: Routledge.

Lee, Pei-Hui (2015) *Tsiah8 Tinn1-Tinn1: Táinán-de Shítáng Gānwèi Yìwǎng* [The Food Culture of Traditional Sugar Products in Tainan]. M.A. thesis. Kaohsiung: National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism.

Motschenbacher, Heiko (2020) "Walking on Wilton Drive: A Linguistic Landscape Analysis of a Homonormative Space." [In:] *Language & Communication*. Vol. 72; 25–43.

Motschenbacher, Heiko (2023) "Affective Regimes on Wilton Drive: A Multimodal Analysis." [In:] *Social Semiotics*. Vol. 33(1); 168–187.

Packard, Jerome L. (2000) *The Morphology of Chinese: A Linguistic and Cognitive Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pavlenko, Aneta (2009) "Language conflict in post-Soviet linguistic landscapes." [In:] *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*. Vol. 17 (1/2); 247–274.

Pennycook, Alastair (2024) "The City." [In:] Robert Blackwood, Stefania Tufi, and Will Amos (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Linguistic Landscapes*. London/New York, NY/Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic; 155–170.

Peukert, Hagen (2015) "Urban Linguistic Landscaping: Scanning Metropolitan Spaces." [In:] Mikko Laitinen and Anastassia Zabrodskaja (eds) *Dimensions of Sociolinguistic Landscapes in Europe: Materials and Methodological Solutions* (Language Competence and Language Awareness in Europe, Vol. 7). Bern/New York, NY: Peter Lang; 29–51.

Pinker, Steven (2008) *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. London: Penguin Books.

Plinta, Magdalena (2015) "Chinese Classifiers (Measure Words): A Phenomenon That is Hard to Translate." [In:] *Studia Linguistica*. Vol. 34; 117–123.

Robbins, Brooke Chapin (2017) "American in Taiwan: Have you eaten?" [At:] https://medium.com/@brookerobbins/american-in-taiwan-have-you-eaten-c278e1f9a64d (date of access: June 20, 2025).

Searle, John R. (1975) "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts." [In:] Keith Gunderson (ed.) *Language, Mind and Knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; 344–369.

Shohamy, Elana, Eliezer Ben-Rafael (2015) "Linguistic Landscape: A New Journal." [In:] *Linguistic Landscape: An International Journal*. Vol. 1(1–2); 1–5.

Show Show Bar (2025) "About info of Show Show Bar." Facebook page. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/showshowbar/ on June 20, 2025.

Shyu, Shu-Ing, Yu-Fang Wang, Zhi-Jie Lin (2013) "Approximation to Secondary Predication Structure: A Case of V-*qilai* in Mandarin Chinese." [In:] *Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 14 (4); 701–736.

Sloboda, Marián (2024) "Multilingualism." [In:] Robert Blackwood, Stefania Tufi, Will Amos (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Linguistic Landscapes*. London/New York, NY/Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic; 317–333.

Tusk, Julia (2024) "A Polish Borough? The Linguistic Landscape of Ealing and Its Relationship with the Sense of Identity of Polish Immigrants." [In:] *Socjolingwistyka*. Vol. 38; 159–174.

Van Hoey, Thomas (2022) "Onomatopoeia in Mandarin Chinese." [In:] Lívia Körtvélyessy and Pavol Štekauer (eds) *Edinburgh Handbook of Onomatopoeia (Handbooks of Linguistics)*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Wang, Hao-I (2007) *Mànshí Fǔchéng: Táinán Xiǎochī-de Gǔzǎowèi Quánjìlù* [Casual Gourmet Tainan]. Taipei: PsyGarden Publishing Company.

Received: 18.02.2025
Reviewed: 20.06.2025
Accepted: 16.09.2025