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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Satire of Immigration Policies in Joe Wong's Stand-Up Humour

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ABSTRACT

Political satire has long been used as a means of critiquing societal structures and governmental policies, particularly in the realm of immigration, where humour can expose contradictions, stereotypes, and biases within dominant ideologies. This study analyses Joe Wong's satirical performance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, focusing on how humour operates as a form of political commentary that challenges immigration policies and discourses associated with former U.S. President Donald Trump. Drawing on Van Dijk's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the research examines Wong's linguistic strategies, pragmatic flouting of conversational norms, narrative framing, and interaction with the live audience. Findings suggest that Wong's satire disrupts discriminatory political narratives while fostering a sense of solidarity around immigrant identity, enabling audiences to critically reflect on exclusionary attitudes and power dynamics. By demonstrating how stand-up comedy can simultaneously entertain and resist political dominance, this study contributes to broader scholarship on political humour, discourse, and resistance, highlighting satire as a performative tool for challenging entrenched social prejudices and reimagining immigrant representation in the public sphere.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, critical discourse analysis, Van Dijk, Joe Wong, satire

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Introduction

When foreigners think about Chinese people speaking English or Asian immigrants, stereotypical images often come to mind such as yellow-skinned characters speaking unintelligible "gibberish" in old films (Ma, 2019). This supposed "variety" of speech, however, is largely a stigmatised social construct. While these individuals may be ethnically recognised, the perception is often shaped by racialised discourse rather than any explicit, systematised linguistic basis, mirroring the broader stigmatisation of immigrants in American racial narratives (Hanna, 1997). Such stereotypes not only perpetuate marginalisation but also reduce immigrant identities to caricatures, stripping away their individuality and lived experiences. Comedy, especially political satire, offers a unique platform to challenge these harmful discourses by exposing their absurdity through humour.

This study examines the satirical political comedy of Joe Wong, a Chinese immigrant comedian, focusing on one of his performances on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Wong's act, while comedic on the surface, engages deeply with issues of racial stereotyping, immigration, and political power dynamics in the United States. Using Teun A. van Dijk's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model particularly its attention to genre and register, this article seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How does Joe Wong challenge the power abuse (dominance) of the Trump administration in this stand-up comedy routine?
2. How successful is Joe Wong in challenging this power abuse, as reflected in the audience's reaction?

Literature Review

Van Dijk's (2000) strategies for analysing aggressive humour, such as metaphor, contrast, and hyperbole, provide a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of other-directed hostile humour and self-ridicule in political satire. These strategies are particularly relevant in political parody, where humour often serves as a vehicle for critique and commentary. For instance, in "The President Show," the use of metaphor allows the creators to draw parallels between political actions and broader societal issues, thereby amplifying the impact of their satire. Contrast is employed to highlight the discrepancies between political rhetoric and reality, often by juxtaposing the exaggerated persona of the president with more grounded characters. Hyperbole, on the other hand, exaggerates certain traits or actions to an absurd degree, making the underlying critique more apparent and engaging for the audience (Van Dijk, 2000).

Studies in political discourse focus on the language and communication strategies of professional politicians, such as presidents and prime ministers. This focus is evident in the scripts of shows like "The President Show," which often parody the speeches and public statements of the president of the United States. By mimicking the president's language and mannerisms, these shows provide a satirical commentary on political discourse and its impact on public perception. The humour in "The President Show" is deeply rooted in political contexts, drawing on real-life events and statements to create a comedic narrative that resonates with viewers. This approach not only entertains but also encourages critical reflection on the nature of political communication and its role in shaping public opinion (Van Dijk, 1997).

Genres refer to "discourses with similar purposes and similar features", which typically have conventional schemas consisting of various categories (Sutherland, 2016, p. 121; Van Dijk, 2001, p. 471). The communicative context involves factors such as the time and place of the interaction, the activities taking place (including different types of discourse and genres), and the individuals involved who hold various communicative, social, or institutional roles and identities. It also includes their objectives, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies. (ibid, p. 470). Satire is rooted in "strong political ideology" yet can "shatter the audiences' worldview by unsettling the logical order and reasonable expectations" (Momen, 2019, pp. 100-101). When the audiences view political satire, they are "aware of how they are being fooled and what is not working in their political order". The satire is built on "an independent narrative that can disrupt the storyline and at least hint at the implicit theme, thereby opening another venue to understanding the world" (ibid, p. 99). Stand-up comedies normally require "active vocal and physical strategies more easily identifiable for audiences of diversified social backgrounds and receptive to immediate feedback" (C. Li, 2014). Limited studies on Asian American comedians show that their performances align with this typical feature (Jo & Bohannon, 2019), except for Joe Wong, the Chinese American pioneer in American SUC.

Joe Wong, original Chinese name Xi Huang (黄西), is a Chinese American comedian and chemical engineer, born on April 20, 1970 in a small village, graduated from Jilin University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In 1994, he pursued further studies in chemistry at Rice University in Texas, where he earned a doctorate in biochemistry. In late 2001, Wong relocated to Boston and became a Chinese American citizen. Wong's early interest in Chinese stand-up comedy and sketches, as well as

his natural sense of humour, led him to try doing stand-up comedy in Boston, earning him numerous rewards, including making it to the top eight of some 300 contestants across North America in the 2003 Boston International Comedy Festival. Wong became known nationwide in 2009 after his debut on “Late Show with David Letterman”, where his 6-minute performance won rave reviews from the press, which marked a turning point in his career. In 2010, he was invited to perform at the Annual Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner (RTCAD) in the presence of then-Vice President Joe Biden (Zhang, 2015). He was the first Chinese immigrant to perform in the series at this event, and he ranked first in the Third Annual Great American Comedy Festival and was named Boston Comedian of the Year (Song, 2017; Zhang, 2015).

However, as Wong recalled in a 2013 Chinese show, “The Talk”, his career was late blooming compared with his white friends who began doing stand-up comedy in the US at about the same time as him (Huang, 2013). During the worst time, he had to wait in the heavy snow in Boston to plead for at least two passers-by to watch his show so that he could be offered an opportunity (Huang, 2013). He also saw the racist hostility towards Asian immigrants deeply embedded in the US, escalating in recent years (CGTN, 2021). Witness of cruel social reality and his own style of humour shaped Wong's comic style, a carefully crafted one which takes time before one gets the punchline (CGTN, 2021; Y. Li, 2013). C. Li (2014) pointed out that “among all the laughter and applause, a majority of them are for his tactical use of language in telling jokes”, thus through analysing the rhetoric strategies and comparing them with the paralinguistic strategies of Russel Peter, an Indo-Canadian comedian, reveal that the content of Wong's SUC to be the gist of his humour worthy of examination.

Asian American comedians have often used Asian accents for humour effects, with ‘Chinglish’ as one of the “most marked sub-groups among all stigmatised non-native accents” (Jo & Bohannon, 2019). Uncle Roger, a persona created by Nigel Ng, is thus criticised for suffering the risk of enhancing Western stereotypes about Asians by using Chinese accents of the 1970s (Contributor, 2021). However, contrary to the stereotypes of being unintelligible and signalling an uneducated background, Wong's high education and humour style contrast sharply with his heavy but natural ‘Chinglish’ accent, which is one of the stereotypes Wong “reproduces” and “deconstructs”.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) “brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis, a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth)” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 9). It is “explanatory of the constraints and their formation on human well-being, and further the possibilities for transforming existing realities in ways that enhance well-being and reduce suffering” (ibid, p. 10). More specifically, it focuses on the ways discourse structures “enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 467, emphasis original). This study, therefore, chooses Critical Discourse Analysis to interpret the discourse of Joe Wong's stand-up comedies and adopts Teun A Van Dijk's triangulated theoretical framework as a critical approach to discourse that “bridges the societal macro-micro gap” and combines necessary principles in critical discourse analysis such as “power and dominance, discourse and access, social cognition, discourse structures” (Van Dijk, 2001).

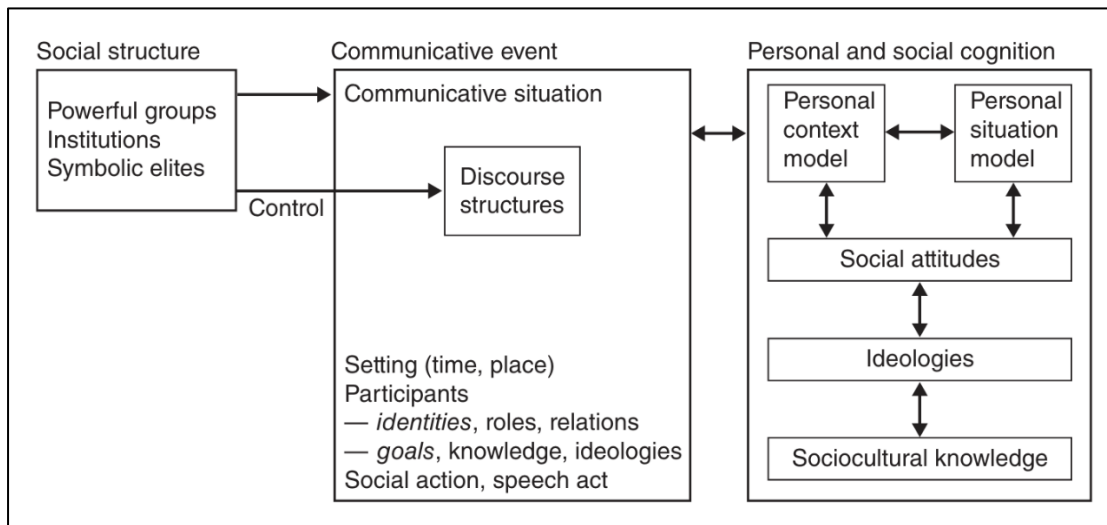
The power of dominant groups may be integrated into “general consensus” or “hegemony” but enacted in multiple “taken-for-granted actions of daily life”, typically in “sexual or racial discourses” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 469). “Access to or control over public discourse and communication” is an important “symbolic’ resource”, the quantity and influence of which is positively correlated with the degree of social power or control one has (ibid, p. 470). Van Dijk argues that if discourse is defined “in terms of complex communicative events, consisting of text and context”, in contrast, “access and control” are defined “both for the relevant categories of the communicative situation, defined as context, as well as for the structures of text and talk” (ibid).

Thus, one way for “power as control” to be realised is through control of text and context of discourse through control of subcategories of the two components (see the second box of communicative event in Figure 1). Among the categories controlled most crucial is “who controls topics (semantic

macrostructures) and topic changes” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 471). Another way is “mind control” through “mental models” (sometimes called “situation models”) and/or “context models” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 472). The first is “subjective representations of the events, action, or situation a discourse is about and hence have a referential semantic nature”, while the second “control pragmatic properties of discourse, such as speech acts, appropriateness, or politeness” (ibid, emphasis original). Specific discourse structures may influence “the contents and structures of mental models in ways preferred by the speakers”, which may result in “manipulation” (ibid). Such control of mental models and “shared generic social representations, group attitudes and ideologies” may also depend on “contextual conditions”, such as whether the recipients regard the people or situations as “authoritative, trustworthy, or credible” (see the third box of Figure 1).

Figure 1

Schema of the Discursive Reproduction of Power (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 474)



Methods

A qualitative methodology was adopted to analyse a 5-minute stand-up comedy performance by Joe Wong on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, retrieved from YouTube. The selected video, approximately 5:06 minutes long with over 6 million views, was closely watched multiple times to ensure comprehensive understanding. The data was then transcribed using the Jefferson Transcription System, which captures nuanced details of spoken discourse and is widely employed in discourse analysis (Park & Hepburn, 2022). Although this transcription system effectively captures linguistic and pragmatic elements relevant to CDA, limitations exist regarding precise measurement of intervals between utterances. After transcription, the data underwent critical discourse analysis to identify relevant linguistic, pragmatic, and narrative elements.

Results

The communicative situation of this performance was *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, “an American late-night news and political satire talk show hosted by Stephen Colbert, who was the former host of *The Colbert Report*, a successful satirical political comedy” (LaMarre et al., 2009; Zekavat, 2021). Joe Wong’s performance therefore constituted a discourse of *satirical political stand-up comedy*. The institution in power in 2018 was the Trump administration, which provided material and boosted post-mid-term-election debates (especially opposition) among the public. Host Stephen Colbert himself has viewed Donald Trump as “good for jokes and not much else” (Johnson, 2018). The interaction between comedians and audiences, most noticeably through ‘affiliative responses’ such as laughter, cheer, and applause, indicates the extent to which comedians achieve their dual intentions: first, to provoke affiliative responses, and second, to “make the audiences question their previously held

assumptions”, including stereotypes (Filani, 2020, p. 323). These criteria guide the assessment of satire’s effect in this study.

Excerpt 1

- 01 So:: I am actually:: (.) an American Immigrant (.) (1.0)
02 And they say that A-America is a country of immigrants
03 So, uh, I have to ask you guys (.)
04 Please leave my country. ((laughter))
05 I’m serious. ((laughter))
06 We have a zero-tolerance policy right now = ((laughter))

This discourse belongs to spoken discourse with a casual style and the genre purpose of playing (Sutherland, 2016). The audiences were familiar with the conventions of satirical political comedies, although they were unfamiliar with the comedian. Therefore, Wong began with a brief self-introduction, using a structural discourse marker, which signified the beginning of the stand-up comedy. This discourse marker creates familiarity of an old acquaintance picking up a conversation or beginning to narrate a personal story, thus reducing the distance between the audience and the comedian.

Trump's emphasis on national unity was manifested in part in his attitude towards the speaking ability of immigrants, placing English speaking as a key criterion of his immigration plan (The White House, 2019). Acknowledging the social structure, Wong consciously used marked prosodic features, in contrast with his overall fluent expression in English, to project his immigrant identity in a self-deprecating manner. These marked features include the lengthened pronunciation of so and atypical rising intonation in pronouncing immigrant, as well as stammer in America (lines 01-02) and before “I have to ask...” (line 03) implicate hesitance, which the audiences were likely to associate with the stereotyped lack of fluency in English of immigrants in America.

Citizenry is often an emphasis of political discourse (Balogun & Murana, 2018, p. 65). Apart from the English-only policy, the repetitive emphasis of “America first” in Trump’s security narrative “reframes national identity through the collective insecurities of particular constituencies” (Lofflmann, 2021, p. 545). Wong immediately followed the opening introduction with a “request” of the audience to leave “his (my) country” with an emphasis on please. The possessive article, which he specified as “his country”, implicated the audience and himself as different, stressing his possession of the country, which he does not, thus flouting the maxim of quality by not telling the truth. Meanwhile, he flouted the cooperative principle by juxtaposing the interpersonal discourse marker please, which was supposed to denote politeness, with the “rude and ridiculous” request of the audience (fellow Americans) to leave America. Taxing on these pragmatic properties, Wong could enact other-directed hostile humour and present “a hostile critique” of the politician’s power abuse (Becker, 2012, p. 792).

In this way, the semantic model “my country” subtly subverts the mental construct Trump manipulated in his political speeches. As this beginning occurred within a discourse of comedy in a series of television shows with possibly strong objections towards public policies of the Trump administration, the audiences understood that the comedian was making a parody of Trump and the administration. Therefore, by adding “I’m serious” (line 05), again flouting the maxim of quality, Wong enhanced the hilarious effect of his former request. The parody became more conspicuous in his support of an immigration policy, the “Zero-Tolerance Policy” or the “family separation policy” under the Trump administration (Burnett, 2019). This policy tried to alleviate the illegal immigration issue in America by separating immigrant children from their parents after imprisoning the parents, which had been abolished due to nationwide protests at the time of the stand-up comedy (ibid). This line specifies the discourse setting, December 2018, as seven months after the official enactment of the “Zero-Tolerance Policy” and six months after its abolishment. However, fury did not cease even long after that, regarding the policy as cruel and devastating, with 72% of Americans disapproving of family separation according

to a CBS/You Gov poll (CBS News, 2018). Thus, in terms of the mental model and stance, audiences represented the event negatively and sympathised with the immigrants.

Wong used us as a personal reference or the topic in this clause that implicates the contrast between himself as a member of the anti-immigrant government as an ingroup and the audience as the outgroup, especially imitating the performance of the role of an American government official in announcing the policy to the audiences. With his obvious appearance as an Asian American and immigrant identity deliberately established in the first three lines, Wong's "serious" explanation imitates the official supporting this policy, thus causing laughter in the audience.

Excerpt 2

12 = Trump wants to (.) build a wall to stop immigration (0.7)

13 I'm from China (1.0) ((laughter))

14 So I know a lot about walls. (1.0) ((laughter))

14 They don't work (0.5) ((Applause, laughter))

15 And (centuries) later: it's just gonna become a huge tourist attraction (1.5) ((increasing laughter, applause, cheers)) =

Simply saying "I'm from China" presupposes the introduction of the walls of China for political control, most noticeably the Great Wall of China. Thus, the interpersonal context Wong provided to the audiences through his identification of himself as originally "Chinese" established him as "authoritative" in his knowledge about walls, henceforth his declaration of them as ineffective (line 14). In addition, the textual theme connected Wong's identity with his declaration of his knowledge about walls and presupposed his preposition that walls "don't work". The lack of hedges also increased the affirmativeness of his statement in terms of the contextual model.

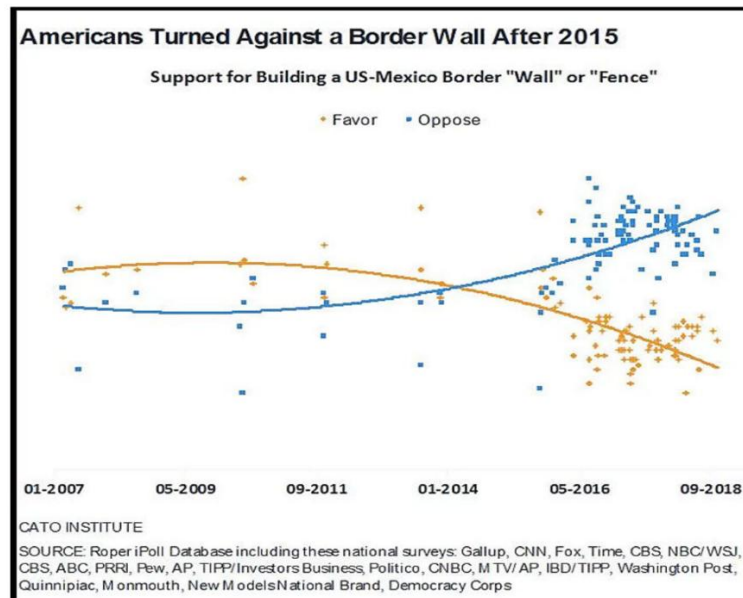
A comparative study of the "Great Walls" of ancient China and modern America suggests that these walls function more as egocentric or ethnocentric symbols than practical or cost-effective solutions (Yang, 2017). In the context of comedy, truth is empirical, and a comedian must primarily resonate with the audience through continuous interaction; thus, the audience's reception of Wong's joke becomes particularly important (Rutter, 1997).

American public opinion had notably turned against building a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico by 2018, influenced by various factors, including sympathy toward immigrants, obstruction of trade, and concerns about American taxpayers ultimately bearing the costs (Ekins, 2019; Gramlich, 2020). According to a 2017 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey, approximately two-thirds of Americans opposed the wall's construction, a finding consistent with other surveys reported by the Polling Report (Drezner, 2018; Norman, 2019). Figure 2 visually captures this shift in American public sentiment between 2007 and 2018, using aggregated survey data from the Cato Institute. Support for the border wall steadily declined after 2015, while opposition significantly increased. By late 2018, the proportion of Americans opposing the wall clearly exceeded those in favour, reflecting changing public attitudes driven by humanitarian concerns, economic implications, and scepticism regarding the wall's effectiveness.

With increasing sympathy with the immigrants since the family separation policy, most of the audience might oppose the border wall, thereby agreeing with or at least understanding Wong's irony in pointing out the uselessness of the wall-building policy practised by the Trump administration. As both walls in China and America carried political purposes, whether the egocentric display of power or ethnocentric control while against the real public interest, it became hilarious when they designated the diminutive functions as "huge tourist attraction" (line 15), thus producing more laughter.

Figure 2

Americans Turned Against a Border Wall After 2015 (Ekins, 2019)



Excerpt 3

42 But my son has a good point, though (.)

43 Nobody in America >especially< a person of colour (.) is exactly the colour they are assigned (.)
°you know (?)°

44 Like this is not exactly yellow (0.3)

45 It's kind of brown (0.3)

46 A black person is not exactly black (.)

47 They're kind of (0.5) brown (.)

48 So we're pretty much different shades of Mexicans (1.5) ((laughter, applause, cheers))

The concomitant usage of 'but' and 'though' is not ungrammatical in this genre. As a textual theme, the adversative conjunction presupposes a proposition different from the ones before, although it is commonly used in spoken discourse as a hedge. Casual speech features were further seen in line 44 to mean "for example", the usage of a kind, assimilation of "kind of" to mean "a little", and pretty much were modified to emphasise a high degree. The syntactical repetition of "...is not exactly..." and semantic repetition of "kind of brown" increased cohesion as well as more powerfully foreshadowed the conclusion that "we're pretty much different shades of Mexicans" in line 48. By using personal reference, Wong aligned himself and all coloured people with the Mexicans to defy the ideology of "colour designation" in the racial discourse in America and "called back" to his opposition to Trump's immigration policies against Mexicans.

Hyperbole is a powerful rhetorical device often used to highlight and critique the pervasive nature of racist discourse. By employing exaggerated statements, speakers can draw attention to the absurdity and ubiquity of racial prejudices. For example, the phrase "Everyone has to have a colour" serves as a

hyperbolic assertion that underscores the omnipresent nature of racial categorisation and its impact on social interactions. Recent research by Iheduru-Anderson and Wahi (2022) discusses how hyperbolic language in nursing discourse can perpetuate racism by reinforcing stereotypes and legitimising discriminatory practices (Iheduru-Anderson & Wahi, 2022). Similarly, Figueroa et al. (2023) developed a framework for analysing racism narratives in medical literature, highlighting how hyperbole can shape public perception and reinforce racial biases (Figueroa et al., 2023). By exaggerating certain traits or behaviours, hyperbole entertains and serves as a critical tool for exposing and challenging the underlying prejudices that shape societal norms and values.

These findings reveal patterns of pragmatic flouting, identity construction, and intertextual political references, which will be further analysed in the following section.

Discussion

The findings in this study highlight the complex interplay between humour, identity construction, and political discourse within satirical stand-up comedy. Wong's performance illustrates how comedians can exploit incongruities between social expectations, political ideologies, and personal identity to provoke laughter while simultaneously engaging audiences in critical reflection.

Firstly, the use of pragmatic flouting (Grice, 1975) is central to Wong's delivery. By deliberately violating conversational maxims, such as making absurd requests ("Please leave my country") or false assertions ("I'm serious") Wong creates humorous tension. This violation does not confuse the audience because it occurs in a shared satirical context, where exaggeration and parody are expected. This finding aligns with Dynel's (2014) argument that humour in political satire thrives on deliberate breaches of truthfulness and relevance to expose power imbalances.

Secondly, the study demonstrates that prosodic features and code-switching of identity markers play a vital role in humour reception. Wong manipulates his accented hesitations and cultural references (e.g., "I'm from China, so I know a lot about walls") to index his immigrant identity, simultaneously playing into and resisting stereotypes. This echoes Reyes (2004), who observed that Asian American comedians often exploit their ethnic identities as a site of humour to both align with and challenge societal stereotypes, a process she conceptualizes as strategic authenticity.

Thirdly, Wong's satire works by reframing political discourse. References to Trump's immigration policies, the border wall, and "zero tolerance" are not merely punchlines but function as discursive counter-narratives (Van Dijk, 2008). Through parody and irony, Wong undermines dominant ideologies of exclusion and nationalism, exposing their absurdity. The audience's affiliative responses (laughter, applause) reflect not only amusement but also shared disapproval of these political stances, which supports Filani's (2020) claim that humour can act as a subtle tool for fostering social cohesion around counter-hegemonic positions.

Moreover, the performance underscores how satire functions as a safe space for political dissent. In contexts where directly challenging political power may be contentious, humour allows criticism to be delivered in a socially acceptable, even entertaining, format (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Wong's layered jokes allow audiences to laugh at the absurdity of anti-immigrant rhetoric while implicitly acknowledging its harmful effects. Thus, comedy acts both as entertainment and as a form of critical public pedagogy, encouraging audiences to re-examine entrenched prejudices and political narratives (Baym, 2005).

Lastly, the analysis suggests that hyperbole and absurd analogies (e.g., all people of colour being "different shades of Mexicans") serve a dual purpose: they generate laughter through exaggeration while simultaneously exposing the arbitrariness of racial categorization. This aligns with Figueroa et al. (2023), who emphasize that hyperbole in racial discourse can highlight, critique, and destabilize societal norms related to race and ethnicity.

Overall, Wong's performance demonstrates that satirical political comedy is a form of discursive resistance, where humour operates as a strategic linguistic resource for exposing power abuse, subverting dominant ideologies, and fostering social critique. The combination of pragmatic flouting,

identity performance, intertextual political references, and hyperbole creates a multi-layered comedic discourse that goes beyond entertainment to engage audiences in political reflection and ideological questioning.

Conclusion

Political satire through comedic shows targeting mass audiences is a common phenomenon in the United States. According to Van Dijk (2004), power extends beyond controlling actions; it also shapes thought processes, providing the foundation for discourse (p. 25). Media platforms, such as television, symbolically and persuasively influence public perception, although they do not directly dictate behaviours. Within this context, humour emerges as a significant tool through which political figures' actions and ideologies are critically examined (Fataya, 2020). Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can reveal underlying meanings and highlight how political rhetoric constructs and maintains power structures, often contributing to the marginalization of certain groups.

This study adopts Van Dijk's (2001) CDA framework to investigate how social power, dominance, and inequality are constructed, reinforced, and challenged through language, specifically in comedian Joe Wong's performance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. It explores the relationship between language use and the enactment of power and ideology (Fairclough, 2010), focusing explicitly on Wong's satire of Trump's immigration policies and racial ideologies. Several segments on *The Late Show* utilize humor to critique Trump, using political discourse to scrutinize his policy decisions and attitudes toward immigrants. Through analysis of social structures, communicative events, and personal and social cognition, this study demonstrates how Wong effectively challenges Trump's power abuses by strategically manipulating prosodic, semantic, and pragmatic discourse elements.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

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