

Humour and code switching: a morphosyntactic analysis of the stand-up comedy in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Prior research has recognised that code-switching (CS) is a linguistic phenomenon that is inherently humorous or potentially conducive to eliciting humour in social contexts. Comedians in stand-up comedy shows often switch codes to enhance the humorous effect of their speeches, cultivating a comedic atmosphere. However, the linguistic features that facilitate the humour of CS are yet to be explored. In Hong Kong, it is common to see stand-up comedians switch codes between Cantonese and English or other languages, such as Japanese and Korean. Drawing upon the Matrix Language Frame model (Myers-Scotton, 1993), this case study focuses on a stand-up comedy show by Jim Chim Sui-man, a popular local stage actor and comedian, examining the morphosyntactic patterns and rhetorical features of humorous CS to elucidate the relationship between humour and the structure of CS. The results show that CS does not guarantee a humorous effect and that classic CS is more frequently used by the comedian than composite CS. Specifically, intra-sentential switches are the only type of CS that evoke humour due to their well-formedness, productivity, and effectiveness. The switches involve more content morphemes than system morphemes, as content morphemes provide the comedian with greater flexibility to switch codes and convey meanings. In addition, puns and transliterations are commonly embedded in humorous CS, as their homophonic nature enables comedians to exploit word meanings to create ambiguous meanings that enhance the humorous effect.

Keywords: code-switching, Hong Kong, humour, morphosyntactic analysis, stand-up comedy.

1. Introduction

Humour is often generated to facilitate hilarity and amusement in private conversations or entertaining performances (Attardo, 2001). The creation of humour is highly complicated, as it involves a variety of factors; and humour is culture-specific, as language use and meanings vary from different cultures (Scollen & Scollen, 2000). In other words, humour varies from the cultural and linguistic environment where it is created. Hong Kong is a multilingual city where the majority of people speak Cantonese as their native language and English as a second language (Yip & Tang, 2022). Hong Kong people often switch codes between Cantonese and English or other languages, such as Japanese and Korean, in conversations, presentations or

dramatic performances. In Hong Kong, Cantonese serves as the dominant spoken language, yet code-switching between Cantonese and English is a prevalent practice, reflecting the city's unique multilingual and multicultural environment shaped by its colonial history and global connections (Li, 2000; Bolton, 2003). Hong Kong Cantonese speakers tend to use English to express their status and westernized characteristics, and demonstrate Chinese humility and solidarity (Gibbons, 1983; Yip & Wakefield, 2024). The stand-up comedy of Wong Chi-Wa, a well-known Hong Kong comedian, is taken as an example. Tsang and Wong (2004, as cited in Gardner-Chloros, 2019) claimed that code-switching (CS) assisted Wong to create a shared "Hong Kong identity," since it mirrored "the mixed feelings, ambivalent nature, half-hearted approach to being Chinese in Hong Kong" (Gardner-Chloros, 2009, p.780). CS, along with its humorous effect in the context, is viewed as a solidarity marker that demonstrates membership and sympathy among Hong Kong people.

Code-switching (CS), a common practice in bilingual and multilingual societies, refers to the linguistic phenomenon where people use two languages simultaneously or interchangeably (Valdes-Fallis, 1977). This linguistic behaviour allows speakers to navigate social identities and status, streamline communication by utilizing specific terms from each language, and introduce emphasis or stylistic nuance into conversations (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993). CS can be perceived as ill-mannered, showy, ignorant, aggressive, and arrogant by Cantonese speakers (Gibbons, 1983). Apart from its socio-pragmatic functions, CS is also regarded as one of the primary mechanisms for creating humour in various social contexts (Siegel, 1995), such as casual interactions across sociocultural groups (Apte, 1985; Williams, 1987), lyric writing (McClure & McClure, 1988; Stølen, 1992), and comedic performances (Palani & Bakar, 2023; Woolard, 1987). Given the intertwining relations among humour, CS and culture, this study aims to explicate the connections between humour and CS by conducting qualitative discourse analysis. Specifically, this study reveals the structural features of humorous switches in the Hong Kong context, elucidating the relationship between humour generation and types of CS with different morphosyntactic structures. An episode of a stand-up comedy show produced and performed by Jim Chim Sui-man, a popular local stage artist and comedian in Hong Kong, was selected as a case study.

2. Code-switching and humour

Sociolinguistic and anthropological studies of code-switching in other societies show that it leads to humour in three closely connected ways (Siegel, 1995). First, CS itself can act as a signal indicating the presence of a joke; second, the switch between two codes can be the object of humour; and third, the variety of language involved in the switching can be considered funny (Siegel, 1995). Apte (1985) also contends that a particular variety of language might be "considered appropriate for humour" (p.190). CS functions as both a means and a message, serving as a tool that indicates speech acts of speakers (Scotton, 1988). More specifically, Ferguson (1959) points out that informal language style, vernacular language variety, or a low variety in bilingual communication is likely to create humour. Previous ethnographic studies suggest that "speakers are not only aware of the 'high' and 'low' varieties of language but are also likely to use only the low variety for humor" (Apte 1985, p.190). Based on Joos's (1967, p.11) classification and terminology, it can be argued that the casual rather than formal styles for humour are widespread. McClure and McClure (1988) provided examples of switching between Saxon and Romanian, and between German and Romanian, for comic effect in bawdy songs in Transylvania. In one of the songs McClure and McClure (1988) introduced, the first part of the song is in Romanian, whereas the second part is in German, e.g. 'Eu nu pot s-adorm die ganze Nacht' ([Romanian] I can't sleep [German] the whole night). Stølen (1992) described

similar language play using interlingual puns and loan translations with Danish and English in occasional songs in America. In one wedding anniversary song, the lyricist used the English word “little” in combination with the near-identical Danish adjective “lille” (which also means ‘little’), presumably with the intent of evoking special sentiments in her audience.

Language is one of the many features of a cultural group that can be stereotyped, mocked, or made fun of by others (Apte, 1985). When a specific language, dialect, or style is recognized as ‘funny,’ people from other linguistic backgrounds who use it are likely to inspire laughter (Apte, 1985). CS serving as a cue for joking can be inherently funny, and the language or dialect one switches to might be used for humorous mockery or parody (Siegel, 1995). Poking fun at various dialects, usually by using stereotypical features, forms the basis of ‘dialect humour’ in the English-speaking world. This is evident in the imitation of certain English varieties, like Scottish English (e.g., Macaulay, 1987), as well as regional dialects within specific countries, such as Southern or Brooklyn dialects in the United States (Apte, 1985, pp.197-98). For instance, to mimic Southern American English, speakers might use ‘y’all’ and centralize diphthongs in words like ‘eye,’ ‘I,’ and ‘my.’ Similarly, in the Brooklyn variety, the diphthong [oy] may be used in words like ‘bird’ and ‘third,’ resulting in pronunciations like ‘boyd’ and ‘toyd.’ Another language is used to mimic or parody a socio-cultural group or a particular type of person. A similar situation has been reported in Guyana, where a switch from Creole into English in an informal conversation is funny in itself but can also be interpreted as a mimicking insult to a hearer’s pretentiousness (Williams 1987, p.86).

Previous studies recognised that CS is broadly utilised to facilitate humour in various comedic contexts. For instance, the unexpected use of CS is likely to elicit humour, and this element of surprise plays a crucial role in the comedic effect, making the humour less predictable and more engaging (Salem et al., 2020). Indeed, stand-up comedy is one of the social practices where CS is frequently used to foster humour. Palani & Bakar (2023) suggest that Malaysian comedian Harith Iskander employs CS between Malay and English to evoke humour that resonates with both local and expatriate audiences. The CS tends to be well-formed and facilitates humorous effect (Palani & Bakar, 2023). CS in comedic contexts allows for playful subversion of linguistic norms, enhancing the audience’s experience by highlighting shared cultural understanding (Woolard, 1987). Adetunji (2022) investigated Nigerian stand-up comedy, explicating the strategic use of Pidgin English and local dialects to establish a connection between the comedians and audiences. The connection enhances a resonant comedic atmosphere and often produces humour through well-timed switches and culturally specific references (Adetunji, 2022).

Though prior research has recognised the close relationship between humour and CS, none of prior research investigates and elucidates how the humorous effect is catalysed by CS presented in different forms. Apart from socio-cultural contrasts, the role of the structural patterns and rhetorical features of CS utterances in eliciting humour remains underexplored. It is significant to explore the structural elements underpinning comedic performances and how the frequent use of CS influences audiences’ reactions and interpretations of jokes and punchlines (Wawryniuk, 2021). Identifying specific structural patterns that most effectively elicit humour can provide valuable insights for performers in comedic contexts and deepen our understanding of the relationship between linguistic forms and humour. To address this gap, this case study of the stand-up comedy performed by Jim Chim Sui-man examines the morphosyntactic structure and types of CS, as well as the rhetorical elements used in CS utterances, in relation to their humorous effect.

3. Typology of code-switching and matrix language frame model

Understanding the typology of CS requires knowledge of a set of terminologies that indicate the languages involved in a CS scenario. Sridhar and Sridhar suggest employing the terms ‘host language’ and ‘guest language’ to describe the languages involved in code-switched utterances (Sridhar & Sridhar, 1980). With respect to the typology of CS, Poplack (2000) proposed three categories, namely tag-switching, inter-sentential switching and intra-sentential switching. This categorisation not only enhances understanding of CS types but also provides a useful framework for in-depth analysis of CS structures. Specifically, tag-switching refers to the inclusion of a tag or gap filler, such as you know, I mean and right, in utterances (Poplack, 2000). Jalil (2009) offers a clear illustration of inter-sentential switching from a syntactic perspective. According to Jalil (2009), inter-sentential switching occurs at the clause or sentence level. The kind of switching occurs at the point where a host language utterance ends, followed by a guest language utterance (Appel, 1987). An example of the switching between English and Spanish in Poplack’s study can be considered:

“Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in Spanish y termino en español”
Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in Spanish and finish in Spanish

The switching occurs at the clause level, as the first clause “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in Spanish” in English, the host language, is followed by the second clause “y termino en español,” which is Spanish, the guest language.

Unlike inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential switching occurs within a single sentence or clause (Myers-Scotton & Jake, 1993). The linguistic elements and internal structure of the guest language appear within a host language utterance in compliance with its grammatical rules (Sridhar & Sridhar, 1980). Instances can be found in the study by Kebeya (2013):

“KWATUMIKIRA hand drilling”
We used hand drilling

Kebeya (2013) introduces a CS between Luo and English. Luo, a Western Nilotic language within the Nilo-Saharan family, is spoken by approximately 4 to 5 million individuals, primarily in Kenya’s Nyanza Region and Tanzania’s Mara Region. In the instance, the speaker uses both Luo and English in the utterance, where “KWATUMIKIRA” in Luo corresponds to “we used” in English. The Luo language fits into an English-structured utterance without violating English grammatical rules or syntactic structure.

Intra-sentential switching is the most complex type of CS due to “the high probability of violation of syntactic rules, as well as the requirement of a great knowledge of both grammars and how they map onto each other” (Jalil, 2009). Analysing intra-sentential switching seems to be relatively more complicated compared to other types of CS and requires a comprehensive framework that takes the syntactic structures of languages into consideration. The Matrix Language Frame model (MLF model), proposed by Myers-Scotton (1993), is a multi-layer model that assists in elucidating the formation of intra-sentential switching. Myers-Scotton (1993) divides intra-sentential switching into two sub-models: classic CS and composite CS. Classic CS refers to the switch where one of the participating languages dominates the morphosyntactic structure of the bilingual sentence, whereas composite CS specifies the bilingual clause where its morphosyntactic structure is attributed to two languages. In other words, the morphosyntactic structure of composite CS is shaped by both languages rather than dominated by either one in the switch. The language that contributes to the morphosyntactic structure of a switch is called the matrix language (ML), while the other participating language is called the embedded language (EL). The identification of ML aligns with the Morpheme

Order Principle: “in a bilingual CP [Complementizer Phrase] consisting of singly-occurring EL lexemes and any number of ML morphemes, surface morpheme order will be that of the ML” (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p.83).

To establish a clear-cut boundary that defines a unit of CS, Myers-Scotton (1993) suggests using the complementizer phrase (CP) as the unit of analysis. CP is a syntactic term specific to subordinate conjunctions, relative pronouns and relative adverbs. Three types of constituents are allowed in classic CS: mixed constituents, ML islands and EL islands. Mixed constituents consist of morphemes from both the ML and EL. A bilingual CP itself is a large mixed constituent. ML islands, composed entirely of ML morphemes, are not affected by the EL and adhere to the grammatical rules of the ML to achieve well-formedness. Constituents that are entirely in the ML are almost expected to be problem-free. The focal point comes to the EL islands, which comprise only EL morphemes. Although EL islands are well formed according to EL grammar, they are subject to the constraints of ML grammar because they are inserted into an ML frame. It should be noted that “islands must show structural dependency (meaning almost necessarily that they must consist of two or more morphemes)” (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p.58). If the EL is a single word, it should be simply defined as an EL morpheme.

Myers-Scotton (1993) advocates using morphemes as the smallest units to analyse the morphosyntactic structure of CS. She introduces content morphemes and system morphemes as key concepts in the analytical framework. Content morphemes are activated at the lemma level, selected in accordance with the speaker’s intention, and subsequently are assigned a thematic role. On the other hand, system morphemes cannot get assigned a thematic role. In other words, content morphemes, which are similar to free morphemes, often predominate in a constituent as they carry semantic meanings conveyed by the speaker. Examples of content morphemes include nouns, verbs, and possibly adjectives. In contrast, system morphemes, which resemble bound morphemes, are function words or inflections, such as prepositions, plural markers and possessive markers.

An asymmetric relation exists between content and system morphemes due to the System Morpheme Principle: “In a bilingual CP, all system morphemes which have grammatical relations external to their head constituent will come from the ML” (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p.58). This means system morphemes are taken only from the ML, whereas content morphemes can be employed from both the ML and EL.

In classic CS, the well-formedness of constituents is emphasized according to the Uniform Structure Principle (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p.120):

A given constituent type in any language has a uniform abstract structure and the requirements of well-formedness for this constituent type must be observed whenever the constituent appears.

According to the principle, a constituent constructed by morphemes should show “structural dependence relations” (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p.78) if it is well-formed. This principle also implies that system morphemes appear in the ML to achieve the well-formedness of language. This study employs the MLF model as the framework to analyse the potential syntactic patterns of humorous CS in the chosen Hong Kong stand-up comedy show.

4. Exploring Hong Kong stand-up comedy: The case of Jim Chim Sui-Man

Defined by Mintz (1985, p. 71), stand-up comedy is “an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle.” It can be both serious and comic (Sartre, 1981), in the sense that the performer could discuss controversial social issues that reveal the truth about a society (Davis, 1993) using playful language. Logically speaking,

to a certain extent, there might be some differences in the features of stand-up comedy in different regions because cultural and social factors determine differences in delivery style. In other words, attributes of stand-up comedy may be culturally and socially distinguished, though common grounds exist. Unlike Western counterparts, Hong Kong stand-up comedy shows, which usually last around two hours, are generally performed with prepared scripts. However, in terms of content, both Western and Hong Kong stand-up comedy shows address social and moral issues framed in humour (Tsang & Wong, 2004). Jim Chim Sui-man, one of the most famous stage artists and comedians in Hong Kong, has created and operated more than sixty stage productions. He has performed over eight thousand performances, attracting a substantial regular audience (Hong Kong Festival Orchestra, 2014). As stated on his personal website, his stand-up show philosophy is “PIP,” which stands for Pleasure, Imagination and Play. PIP seems to contradict the commonly held image of Hong Kong people, often associated with money-making, stress and work, but it can reflect what Hong Kong people lack and need in life to a certain extent. Typical Hongkongers born and raised in Hong Kong are likely to find his dramatic performances highly Hong Kong-oriented, reflecting certain attributes the Hong Kong-style stand-up comedy.

5. Methodological design

The stand-up comedy show “Cheer U Up,” was selected as a case study. The rationale for this selection is threefold: first, after watching the entire show, it is found that the show involves numerous types of CS compared to other Hong Kong stand-up comedy shows; second, it was created and performed by local Hong Kong artists; and third, it is one of the most popular shows that attempt to inspire citizens to embrace a joyful way of living in spite of stress and a sense of loss in life. The show is an abundant source that facilitates the exploration of features of Hong Kong-style CS in comedy shows. The data for this study primarily consists of a video of the comedy show, which lasts approximately two hours. The video was purchased specifically for this study. Prior to analysing the data, the author attended the show to familiarize himself with the discourse of the stand-up comedy and to note the humorous CS instances that triggered audience’s laughter.

This study employs discourse analysis as the research method to reveal patterns of CS in relation to humorous effect in the context. Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method used to study language and communication in their social and cultural contexts, involving the examination of written, spoken, or signed language to understand how social realities, identities, relationships, and power dynamics are constructed and reflected (Gee, 2014). To begin with, the instances and number of CS are identified and counted manually, using the CP is used as the unit of analysis, in line with Myers-Scotton (1993). The concept of CP is introduced in Section 3. The next step is to categorise the identified switching items into humorous and non-humorous categories. Laughter, which naturally occurs instead of being a sound effect in the show, is taken as the predominant indicator of humour, as the audience tends to stay silent during non-humorous parts but laughs when encountering specific humorous content. The author, who attended the show and confirmed with the show’s video producer, ensured that all instances of laughter in the performance were naturally occurring. The advantage of using naturally occurring laughter as the indicator of humorous effect is that it can minimize the subjectivity involved in identifying humorous CS. Then the identified switches are further categorised into three types: tag switching, inter-sentential and intra-sentential switching. The identified CS items are analysed mainly from a structural perspective through the application of the MLF model (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Detailed illustration of MLF model can be found in Section 3. The structural analysis reveals the morphosyntactic patterns of the CS, such as sentence forms

(statement, imperative and interrogative) and word classes (e.g. noun, verb, adjective, article, and preposition). Apart from the categorisation of CS and the morphosyntactic patterns of the CS categories, rhetorical features adopted in the CS are also identified, examined and explained in relation to emergence of humour, since MLF overlooks contributing to the formation of CS, delivery of meanings and the elicitation of humour. For example, the word classes used to achieve specific rhetorical effects in a sentence can determine the types of CS to be employed; moreover, the probability of humour emergence can be dependent on the combination of different rhetorical devices and CS types. The analysis is in-depth and qualitative. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the morphosyntactic analysis, a colleague specialising Cantonese linguistics and syntax is invited to review the analysis. All the analysis results are eventually endorsed.

6. Findings

A total of 178 units of CP were identified as instances of CS in the stand-up comedy show. After a manual calculation, it was found that the performer switched codes approximately once per minute on average, with the show lasting 150 minutes. The findings suggest that CS is used very frequently in the comedy show. Of the identified units, 28 were deemed humorous due to their elicitation of audience laughter. The ML of most switches is Cantonese, the native language of the performer and most of the audience; and most EL instances consist of a single morpheme. The identified ELs include English, the Teochew dialect (one of the dialects in Guangdong province), and Japanese. English is the overwhelming majority, as it is the second language of most people in Hong Kong, where implements bilingual (Chinese and English) education system. This finding points not only to the colonial legacy of Hong Kong but also to the fact that multiple cultures coexist in Hong Kong. On the one hand, English proficiency is highly valued in the city and enhances employment opportunities; on the other hand, the growing community of expatriates from Mainland China introduces dialects, such as Teochew and Hokkien, into Hong Kong.

Table 1. Humorous and non-humorous CS

	Number of CS	Percentage
Humorous CS	28	15.8%
Non-humorous CS	150	84.2%
Total	178	100%

Table 2. Types of CS

	Number of CS	Percentage
Tag-switching	14	7.9%
Inter-sentential switching	25	14%
Intra-sentential switching	139	78.1%
Total	178	100%

Table 3. Types of non-humorous CS

	Number of CS	Percentage
Tag-switching	14	9.3%
Inter-sentential switching	19	12.7%
Intra-sentential switching	117	78%
Total	150	100%

Table 4. Types of humorous CS

	Number of CS	Percentage
Tag-switching	0	0
Inter-sentential switching	0	0
Intra-sentential switching	28	100%
Total	28	100%

Table 1 shows that most of the identified CS are non-humorous (150 out of 178, 84.2%), while a comparatively small number are humorous (28 out of 178, 15.8%). Table 2 demonstrates that nearly 80% of the identified CS are in the form of intra-sentential switching (139 out of 178, 78.1%). Inter-sentential switching (25 out of 178, 14%) and tag switching (14 out of 178, 7.9%) are less common in the data set. Table 3 indicates that most of the non-humorous switches (117 out of 150, 78%) are intra-sentential switching. As shown in Table 4, all humorous switches are in the form of intra-sentential switching. No humorous CS is in the form of inter-sentential switching or tag switching. This may be because tag switching “serves to mark an interjection or sentence filler” (Gumperz, 1982, p.77), and is not likely to convey specific meanings that facilitate the generation of humour. In other words, compared to other types of CS, intra-sentential switching plays a crucial role in facilitating humorous effects in the context of stand-up comedy show. Table 5 shows the categories of humorous intra-sentential switching according to the MLF classification (Myers-Scotton, 1993).

Table 5. Types of the humorous intra-sentential switches

	Number	Percentage
Classic CS	21	75%
Composite CS	7	25%
Total	28	100%

As demonstrated in Table 5, most humorous intra-sentential switches (21 out of 28, 75%) are classic CS, which means that the structures of the switches are dominated by Cantonese and exhibit well-formedness in structure. 25% (7 out of 28) of the humorous CS can be categorised as composite CS, as their abstract grammatical structures are influenced by both participating languages. The results indicate that intra-sentential switches can lead to humour regardless of whether their structure is well-formed, though classic CS is more frequently seen to be effective in eliciting humour. The morphosyntactic features that distinguish classic CS from composite CS offer implications for the potential relations between CS and the enhancement of humorous effects in stand-up comedy shows. The following sections illustrate and compare how classic CS and composite CS are structured to produce humorous effect.

6.1. Classic CS

Classic CS refers to the CS instances where the morphosyntactic structure is based on only one of the participating languages (Myers-Scotton, 1993). In this context, Cantonese is the language that dominates the morphosyntactic structure of the CS, whereas languages such as English, Teochew, and Japanese are used for the switches. Table 6 shows the word classes of the switched morphemes and words in the identified classic CS that elicited humour in the stand-up comedy show.

Table 6. Word class of the switched morphemes and words in classic CS

	Number	Percentage
EL morpheme (noun)	10	47%
EL morpheme (adjective)	4	19%
EL morpheme (verb)	4	19%
EL island	3	15%
Total	21	100%

As indicated in Table 6, all of the switched words in classic CS are content morphemes, which contain lexical meanings that are used to convey the comedian’s intended messages. Specifically, a slightly lower than half (47%) of the switched morphemes and words in the humorous classic CS are nouns. Verbs and adjectives are also used in the switches with a lower frequency. This finding aligns with the prior research suggesting that nouns are the most frequently switched items and the primary components switched from the EL into the ML (Hadei & Ramakrishna, 2016).

The overwhelming majority of EL morphemes are single words in their bare forms. Only three examples, including “release myself”, “very good” and “i ra sya i ma se”, are EL islands. The infrequent use of EL islands in the CS suggests that the EL components in humorous CS tend to be concise, making it easier for audiences to process the meanings and their hilarity. According to the MLF model (Myers-Scotton, 1993), EL islands are not only constrained by EL grammar, but also ML grammar in a CS. The three examples of EL islands are independent constituents because they strictly comply with the EL grammars (i.e. English and Japanese grammars). For instance, release myself is a verb phrase, where the transitive verb “release” is attached to the pronoun “myself”; and very good is an adjective phrase composed of an adverb and an adjective. Excerpts 1-3 below exhibit how the EL morphemes and EL islands fit within the ML grammatical frame.

Excerpt 1

Chim: baau1 jyu4 bat1 heoi2 ngo5 zoi3 gan1 nei5sik6 'dɪnə
 Abalone NEG allow 1S again together 2S.....eat dinner
 “Abalone, I cannot have dinner with you.” (Laughter)

Excerpt 2

Michael: fong3 hei3 deoi3 jyu1 ngo5 lai4 gong2 hou2 ci5 jat1 go3 bə'lu:n gam2
 abandon for me much like one CL balloon PRT
 “Giving up, to me, is like a balloon.” (Laughter)

In Excerpt 1, the EL dinner follows the Cantonese verb sik6 “eat”; in Excerpt 2, the EL morpheme balloon comes after the classifier jat1 go3 “a”. When the nominal EL morpheme is placed in the subject position, it typically precedes a verb. In Excerpts 1 to 2, the EL morphemes,

which are single nouns in their bare form, are positioned either as objects or subjects within the clauses. Indeed, previous studies indicate that CS often involves switches at the levels of nouns or noun phrases, as they can serve as subjects, objects or predicates within a clause (Fairchild & Hell, 2015).

Excerpt 3

Michael: ming4 baak6 aa1 **ʌndə'stænd** go3 gwai2 lou2 aa1
 Understand PRT Understand DT foreigner PRT
 “Understood! Understand the foreigner” (Laughter)

Excerpt 4

Chim: ngo5 jiu3 **ri'li:s mar'self**
 1S have to release myself
 “I have to release myself” (Laughter)

Complying with Cantonese grammatical structure, the verbal EL morphemes and islands are normally followed by an object or preceded by a subject. In Excerpt 3, *understand* is followed by the Cantonese noun phrase *go3 gwai2 lou5* “the foreigner,” which is composed of the classifier *go3* and a noun *gwai2 lou5* “foreigner.” In Excerpt 4, the verb phrase *release myself* in bare form comes after the Cantonese modal auxiliary *jiu3* “have to”.

Excerpt 5

Alan: jau5 hak1 sam1 laa1! Gam2 joeng2 gaau2 baan6 gung1 sat1 sing3 zi6 lei4 gam2 zau6 wai4
 zi1 **'veri god** laa1!
 have black heart PRT! Such make office politics PRT PRT PRT Copula very good PRT
 “we are black-hearted so that we can deal with office politics well!” (Laughter)

Excerpt 6

Chim: gam2 ngo5 dou1 hai6 jat1 go3 hou2 **'m3:sɪfl** ge3 jan4 lai4 gaa3 maa1
 PRT 1S PRT Copula CL very merciful PRT person PRT PRT PRT
 “I am also a very merciful person.” (Laughter)

Adjectival EL morphemes and islands typically follow a Cantonese copular or precede a noun to comply with Cantonese grammatical rules. In Excerpt 5, the EL island *very good* comes after the phrase *wai4 zi1* “is regarded as”, which can be understood as a copular in the utterance. In Excerpt 6, the EL morpheme *merciful* follows the Cantonese adverb *hou2* “very” and precedes the Cantonese particle *ge3*, which is commonly used to form a noun phrase.

The illustrated excerpts (Excerpts 1-6) exemplify classic CS with well-formedness. These well-formed CS instances amplify the humorous effect, demonstrating the artistic manipulation of language in live stand-up comedy shows (Palani & Bakar, 2023). Though CS itself can lead to humour (Siegel, 1995), rhetoric elements embedded in the EL appear to boost the humorous effect in context. Pun and transliteration are found to be used in the CS (see Table 7).

Table 7. Rhetoric in the classic CS

	Number	Percentage
Pun	6	29%
Transliteration	2	10%
No rhetoric	13	61%

Table 7 indicates that nearly 40% of the EL in classic CS are modified by either pun (4 out of 10, 25%) or transliteration (2 out of 10, 12.5%), whereas the rest of the switches are purely classic CS without any rhetoric devices. According to Ross (2005), a pun refers to the likelihood of two meanings that could be understood from a word, phrase or sentence, and Djafarova (2008, p.268) defines it as “a figure of speech that expresses a few meanings within one which can lead to a humorous effect.”. A pun involves double meanings of a given expression, where the intended meaning is not congruent with the literal meaning of the words. CS emerges when a speaker uses a pun which entails substituting a word or phrase from the EL for one in the ML. The structural and semantic ambiguity of a pun commonly occurs at the phonological level; for example, two words that have similar pronunciation but distinct written forms may carry more than one meaning (Ross, 2005; Attardo, 2020).

Excerpt 7

Chim: **Sam Hui** m4 hai6 **sam1heoi1**
Sam Hui NEG copular “sam1heoi1”
“He is called Sam Hui, not sam1heoi1” (Laughter)

Excerpt 8

Chris: aa3 Jim aa3 m4 hou2 **cut** laa1, o5 dei6 dou1mou5 zyu1 lau4 gam2, o5 dei6 hai6 m4 wui6
kat1 gaa3
PRT. Jim PRT, NEG cut PRT we PRT NEG have swine flu, we will not cough PRT
“Jim, no cut (homophone of kat1, lit. cough) please. We don’t have swine flu and we don’t cough.” (Laughter)

Excerpts 7 and 8 exhibit two pairs of puns: Sam Hui versus sam1 heoi1 “feel guilty,” and cut versus kat1 “cough.” The ambiguity is at the phonological level. Sam Hui səm hui and sam1 heoi1 in Excerpt 7 sound similar; while cut kʌt and kat1 in Excerpt 8 are nearly homophones. These examples demonstrate how a pun is a type of wordplay that signals multiple interpretations typically for humorous purposes (Miller et al., 2017).

Transliteration is a translation skill for the purpose of “representing the characters (letters or signs) of one alphabet by those of another, in principle letter by letter.” (Wellisch, 1975). Often used by stand-up comedians in Hong Kong, transliteration leads to amusing misinterpretations that resonate with the audience’s experiences (Tsang & Wong, 2004). Excerpt 9 shows how transliteration is used to enhance the humorous effect of the CS.

Excerpt 9

Chim: o5 gong2 ge3 hai6 pui3 lei4 si1 '**pøərist**
1S say PRT Copula pui3 lei4 si1 Poorest
“What I said is ‘pui3 lei4 si1’ Poorest” (Laughter)

In Excerpt 9, poorest, an adjective in its superlative form is transliterated into Cantonese as pui3 lei4 si1. In the switch, the comedian first utters the Cantonese transliteration and then the original English word. This exemplifies how humour often arises from phonetic similarities created through transliteration (Wang, 2024). Humorous outcomes stem from the “double-accented” nature of transliterated phrases, which offer unique interpretative layers and foster deeper connections with the audience during performances (Furukawa, 2022).

6.2. Composite CS

Composite CS refers to “the kind of codeswitching (CS) in which the languages involved combine resources to build the surface grammatical frames in which their morphemes co-occur” (Amuzu, 2013, p.384). This type of CS is relatively infrequent compared to classic CS. Excerpts 10 and 11 illustrate the formation and use of composite CS in the stand-up comedy show.

Excerpt 10

Chim: zau6 hai6 tʃi nei5 zi6 gei2 ʌp gaa3 ze2
Copula tʃi yourself ʌp PRT PRT
“That is cheering yourself.” (Laughter)

In Excerpt 10, the constituent of *tʃi nei5 zi6 gei2 ʌp* “cheer yourself” is a mixture of Cantonese and English morphemes, and is based on the syntactic frame of the phrase *cheer you up*. The Cantonese pronoun *nei5 zi6 gei2* “yourselves” replaces *you* in the English frame. The comedian omits the final syllable of the word *cheer* to make it Cantonese alike. This allows the constituent to co-construct the grammatical frame of the switches in a comprehensible manner. Excerpt 11 is another example of composite CS used in the stand-up comedy show.

Excerpt 11

Micheal: nei4 ʌn m4 ʌndə'stænd aa1
2S ʌn (understand) NEG understand PRT
“Do you understand?” (Laughter)

As shown in Excerpt 11, the structure of the mixed constituent *ʌn m4 ʌndə'stænd* “understand or not” is based on the frame of an A-not-A question in Chinese. The corresponding Cantonese expression of such A-not-A question is *ming4 m4 ming4 baak6*. The comedian extracts the prefix *un* of *understand* to conform to the Cantonese grammatical frame, using the syllable *ʌn* to represent the entire word *ʌndə'stænd* in the initial A of the A-not-A question structure. With the insertion of Cantonese negation *m4* into the English word, the morphosyntactic frame of the switch is attributed to both Cantonese and English, the participating languages in the CS.

7. Discussion

Previous studies tend to highlight the sociolinguistic nature of CS as potentially humorous, given its involvement of more than one language variety (Apte, 1985; Siegel, 1995). For instance, using a low variety of language or vernacular is likely to elicit humour in CS (Ferguson, 1959; Joos, 1967). However, this study employs audience laughter as an indicator of humour and finds that CS does not guarantee a humorous effect in stand-up comedy shows, with only 15.8% of identified CS considered humorous based on audience’s naturally occurring laughter. CS is one of the tactics commonly accepted in comedy shows to create humour. Focusing on the morphosyntactic structure of CS, this study offers insights into how diverse structures of CS contribute to the elicitation of humour in stand-up comedy shows. The findings suggest that intra-sentential switches are the only type of CS that evoke humour, whereas tag switches and inter-sentential switches do not create humorous effects in the stand-up comedy show. To be more specific, the stand-up comedian tends to adopt classic CS over composite CS to elicit humour and facilitate the humorous atmosphere of his show. The result aligns with the study of Palani & Bakar (2023), which points out that well-formed CS facilitates humorous effect in stand-up comedy shows. However, the relationship between the well-formedness of CS and

humour elicitation has yet been elucidated. This study suggests that the well-formedness of classic CS enhances the productivity and effectiveness of CS in utterance formation and meaning delivery. It enables comedians to rely on the grammatical rules of the ML to switch codes. Since ML is often the native language of both the comedian and the audience, comedian can convey meanings more effectively, allowing the audience to process meanings quickly. Moreover, the embedded EL within the ML frame is often a content morpheme, including nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and an EL island is often composed of two morphemes of the EL. Compared to system morphemes, content morphemes provide greater flexibility for comedians to switch codes within the grammatical frame of ML for the creation of punchlines. The content morphemes of the EL in classic CS can occasionally be modified by rhetoric, including puns or transliteration, to enhance the humorousness of the CS. The homophonic nature of puns enables comedians to exploit word meanings to create ambiguous meanings that enhance the humorous effect, due to audiences' unexpected associations between meanings (Badara, 2018). Puns can prompt the audience to recognize diverse meanings simultaneously, engaging their cognitive faculties to appreciate the underlying connections (Miller et al., 2017). Similarly, transliteration can lead to humorous interpretations by the audience's incorporation of characters that suggest additional meanings or connotations (Chen, 2013). In addition to classic CS, composite CS is also used by comedians to evoke humour, despite its infrequency. Composite CS is structured with the contribution of two languages and their morphemes. The comedian can disassemble the morpheme(s) of a language according to its morphological or phonological segments and then extract a segment to fit with a syntactic pattern of another language. As a result, unlike classic CS, the morphemes used in the formation of composite CS are not limited to content morphemes but also include system morphemes or even any segment of a word. The relatively infrequent occurrences of composite CS in comedy shows can be attributed to its complexity of formation. Logically, the more complex the morphosyntactic structure, the more difficult the utterance is to comprehend. Research shows that shorter punchlines (under five words) are more likely to achieve comedic effects, as they are easier to process and remember (Ofer & Shahaf, 2022).

8. Conclusion

Drawing upon the MLF model, this case study investigates a Hong Kong stand-up comedy show conducted by Chim Sui-man to reveal the types and morphosyntactic structures of CS in relation to their humorous effects in the context. This study suggests that CS might not guarantee the success of eliciting humour indicated by laughter, even though prior research commonly recognizes the humorous effect led by CS. Specifically, intra-sentential switches are the most predominant type of CS that successfully trigger humour in the stand-up comedy show. The comedian employs more classic CS than composite CS to elicit audience laughter, as the well-formedness of classic CS is more conducive to flexible CS formation and effective meaning delivery. Conversely, composite CS with relatively complex structures may hinder the comedian's utterance creation and require longer processing time for the audience to understand the meanings, thus being less effective at humour elicitation. In addition to morphosyntactic structure, humorous CS occasionally involves rhetoric, including puns and transliteration, which carry unexpected meanings that facilitate the emergence of punchlines. Apart from the relationship between morphosyntactic features of CS and humour, future linguistic research focusing on humour could investigate the humorous effects led by CS at lexical, phonological, semantic, discourse, and pragmatic levels. However, there are certain limitations to the study. Using audience laughter as an indicator to determine whether a CS is humorous can overlook some CS that might also be perceived as humorous but not laughable, though it is difficult to gauge the extent to which an utterance is humorous to the audience. Moreover, non-humorous

CS in the stand-up comedy show is also identified in this study. Comparisons between the morphosyntactic structures of humorous and non-humorous CS can help obtain more insights into the distinctive features between the two categories of CS in the context.

Appendix

Full forms	Abbreviations
Noun	N
Verb	V
Adjective	Adj
Particle	PRT
Classifier	CL
Determiner	DT
Negation	NEG
First person singular	1S
Second person singular	2S
Passive voice	PASS

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