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HUMOROUS STREET SIGNAGE IN TAINAN: A LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Keywords: homophony, humor, linguistic landscape, signage, Tainan

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the humorous street signage in Tainan, a special municipality in southern Taiwan historically recognized as one of the country's oldest cities and a center of cultural heritage. Drawing on a linguistic landscape approach, I examine how humor is embedded in, and communicated through, Tainan's street signage, with particular attention to the interplay between language, culture, and local identity. Data were collected during August and September 2024, comprising 173 photographic records of humorous signboards. The analysis focused on identifying humor strategies and situating them within broader sociocultural and linguistic contexts. Findings indicate that most humorous signboards in Tainan rely on the creative manipulation of homophones. These can be broadly classified into two categories. The first, onomastic-based humor in street signage, draws on proper names such as names of people or figures, institutions or venues, and other products or brands. The second, non-onomastic humor in street signage, involves homophony based on other linguistic and cultural resources, including swear words or taboo expressions, formulaic expressions, phonetic borrowing, grammatical ambiguity, and address forms. The frequent use of Taiwanese Hokkien, alongside Mandarin and foreign languages, reflects a "glocalized" signage culture, where local vernacular coexists with global influences. Humor often emerges from the juxtaposition of colloquial Taiwanese Hokkien – sometimes perceived as rustic or vulgar – with formal or prestigious linguistic registers, creating an incongruous and comic effect. This predominance of wordplay and linguistic incongruity aligns with M. Bakhtin's (1984 [1965]) notion of the "linguistic carnivalesque," where language subverts established norms and hierarchies. Such signage can be seen as a symbolic challenge to formal linguistic and social order, fostering a sense of personal freedom and reflecting the playful disposition often attributed to Taiwanese culture. Humorous elements are processed cognitively through an interaction between visual stimuli, cultural norms, and individual interpretation, resulting in knowing smiles or laughter. Overall, the study demonstrates that humorous street signage in Tainan functions not merely as a marketing tool but as a cultural expression. It engages residents and visitors alike in a shared recognition of local wit, creativity, and identity, while challenging prevailing systems of linguistic and social control.

1. INTRODUCTION

F. Coulmas (2009) and B. Spolsky (2020) propose the term "linguistic cityscapes" to denote the field of linguistic landscape studies, emphasizing the notion that the urban environment provides a natural domain for such research. This assertion is also substantiated by the historical precedent of research on public signage in cities. A. Pennycook (2024) further suggests approach of the city as an assemblage, due to the complexity of a city and the convergence of its multiple actors, including human and nonhuman entities, in the city's continuous development. To be more precise, observing a city from this viewpoint enables researchers to comprehend the dynamic interplay between language, streets, viewers, politics and discourse (Pennycook, 2024, p. 163).

J. Tusk's (2024) study of the linguistic landscape of two streets in the London Borough of Ealing reveals that English, as the predominant language, holds greater significance. However, the presence of minority languages contributes to the multifaceted linguistic composition of Ealing. The responses to the questionnaire further demonstrate that the Polish community residing in the UK is adept at assimilating into the host community. The symbolic function of the linguistic landscape is recognized; that is to say, the power to distinguish between languages and their respective statuses.

A similar linguistic phenomenon has been observed in Taiwan. U. Ang (2019a; 2019b) contends that Taiwan is a multiethnic and multilingual community, comprising three Han languages (i.e., Mandarin, Hokkien, and Hakka), fifteen Austronesian languages, and one Japanese-based creole. This observation leads to the conclusion that Taiwan can be regarded as a linguistic ecosystem characterized by linguistic diversity. Despite the fact that individuals who speak different language varieties reside together, most of them are still grouped and can be regionalized. Specifically, speakers of Taiwanese Hokkien are predominantly located in central and southern Taiwan, with a higher population density compared to speakers of Mandarin. As Ang further elucidates, Taiwanese Hokkien spoken in Tainan is a blend of Zhangzhou and Quanzhou dialects, a consequence of the city's historical significance as the capital of Taiwan prefecture during the Qing dynasty.

The multilingual phenomenon is also evident in street signage in Taiwan. The general public's stereotypical perception is that signboards in Taiwanese Hokkien are typically located in rural areas or in regions where commercial activities are less prevalent. This stereotypical perception is a consequence of the widespread assumption that Mandarin is a prestigious language and Taiwanese Hokkien (or Taiwanese-accented Mandarin) is a vulgar language used by less educated people or women lacking 氣質 *qìzhí* 'refined disposition', as exemplified by Taiwan's betelnut beauties (see Su, 2008). As a greater proportion of the population in urban areas is more highly educated, it is less likely that Taiwanese Hokkien will be used on signboards in urban areas.

However, H.-H. Ho et al. (2018) observe that signboards in Taiwanese Hokkien are also prevalent in urban areas, even more so than in the countryside. This indicates a positive correlation between the number of signboards in Taiwanese Hokkien and commercial activities, whereby the more developed the commercial activities, the greater the

prevalence of signboards in Taiwanese Hokkien. Ho et al. further note that signboards in Taiwan have also reflected a combination of Mandarin and Taiwanese Hokkien, reflecting the dominant status of Mandarin on the island.

The linguistic landscape approach also permits an investigation of the functions of humor in a given context, including that of queer space. In their analysis of the linguistic landscape of Taiwan LGBT+ Pride from 2010 to 2020, B. J. L. Rowlett et al. (2025) observe that the concept of "*tai*-ness" can be reified via the use of mockery as a form of shared humor. In particular, the use of humor serves to reinforce the solidarity of the LGBTQIA+ community in Taiwan. Focusing on humorous street signage in Tainan, a special municipality in southern Taiwan historically recognized as one of Taiwan's oldest cities, this study aims to explore what humor has revealed about the city or the country.

2. THE DATA

The aim of this study is to investigate the mechanisms underlying humorous street signage in Tainan, with particular attention to the role of homophony as a productive humor strategy. The analysis adopts the framework of linguistic landscape analysis, which examines the presence, form, and function of language displayed in public spaces as proposed by R. Landry and R.Y. Bourhis (1997). Within this framework, humorous signs are considered part of the city's semiotic landscape and are interpreted as reflections of both linguistic creativity and sociocultural practices. The present study seeks to identify the linguistic and semiotic features that produce humorous effects, to classify the humor mechanisms involved, and to situate these within the broader cultural context of Taiwanese society.

The data were collected in Tainan during August and September 2024 through systematic photographic documentation of public signage. The identification of humorous street signs was guided by my linguistic intuition as a Mandarin teacher, sinologist, and Chinese linguist, supported by previous scholarly observations on Taiwanese humor (e.g., Chen, 2017). Following L.-C. Chen's description of contemporary Taiwanese humor as eliciting "a hearty laugh or a knowing smile" among those familiar with shared cultural knowledge, the present study adopts a broad operational definition of humor. In this study, humor refers to any textual or semiotic expression that evokes amusement, laughter, or smiling as a result of perceived wit, playfulness, or creativity.

A total of 173 photographs of humorous street signage were collected in Tainan. All photographs were taken by me during fieldwork in the city. For each photograph, the time and location were carefully documented. The corpus was subsequently examined to identify the humor mechanisms present in each case. Many signboards employ multiple humor strategies, and interpretations may vary. Nevertheless, preliminary classification indicates that homophony constitutes the largest category. This category does not comprise all 173 items; other mechanisms include the use of certain characters, compounding, classifiers, denominalization, allusion, analogy, speech acts, onomatopoeias, and self-deprecation (see Hajndrych, under review). Because the mechanisms

often overlap, precise quantification is challenging. Nevertheless, the predominance of homophony is recognized by local residents. This preference is also reflected in popular discourse. For example, a post in the Facebook group 台南式 *Táinán-shì* 'Tainan Style' dated April 21, 2024 celebrates the creative use of homophony in local signage.[1]

The theoretical orientation of this study also draws on incongruity theory (e.g., Attardo, 2020), which suggests that humor often arises from the perception of an unexpected relationship between form and meaning. This is combined with the analytical tools of linguistic landscape analysis to interpret humorous signage as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon embedded in the urban semiotic environment.

3. HUMOROUS SIGNBOARDS BASED ON HOMOPHONES

V. Thaler (2016) contends that the use of wordplay can be manifested through a variety of linguistic means, ranging from speech to vocabulary, word formation, and associated rhetorical skills. In many different fields in China, for instance, the substitution of homophonous sounds to modify existing names is frequently employed in the study of onomastics. According to I. Kałużyńska (2018), this phenomenon can be attributed to two primary factors: the inherent characteristics of the Chinese language itself, and the process of sound change in the context of spoken Chinese. L.-C. Chen et al. (2021) have further noted that a significant proportion of Chinese neologisms are derived from homophonic puns. These neologisms serve not only to reflect a shifting sociocultural landscape but also to engender humorous responses from members of the Chinese-speaking community. For instance, the neologism 河蟹 *héxiè* 'river crab' is a homophonic pun of 和諧 *héxié* 'harmony', which is leveraged in reference to the Chinese government's official policy for a harmonious society and the accompanying policy of web censorship. The neologism is now widely employed to denote the process of "harmonising off" one's online postings, eliciting a knowing smile.

In this study, the majority of humorous signboards have been found to rely on homophones. These can be broadly divided into two main categories. The first category, onomastic-based humor in street signage, involves the use of proper names to create humorous effects. Examples include homophony based on the names of people or figures, institutions or venues, and other products or brands. The second category, non-onomastic humor in street signage, comprises humorous signboards that do not draw on proper names but instead exploit other linguistic and cultural resources, such as swear words or taboo expressions, formulaic expressions, phonetic borrowing, grammatical ambiguity, and address forms.[2] As the data will show, certain characters are used as product identifiers or to highlight the strengths of the products or services.

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/tainanstyle2020/posts/pfbid02BxmmCiYnqz8C5u76ZQ5ZUjpJUQBNWGX6UeEdxi125VELSut1U6EWTsv99nzPvvdzl?locale=zh_TW (accessed: 10 December 2025).

[2] I did not quantify the data because the purpose of this study is to illustrate the tendency for humorous signboards to be created based on homophony rather than to provide precise statistical measurements. The identification of humorous mechanisms is partly subjective and relies on my own interpretation, which

3.1 Onomastic-based humor in street signage

3.1.1 Names of people or figures

As demonstrated in this category of homophones, the shop and restaurant names are based on homophones inspired by widely-known people or figures. While these names may appear to be humorous, it is important to note that the concept of what is perceived as taboo in Western countries is not necessarily understood in the same way.

Fig. 1(a)

Fig. 1(b)

Fig. 1(c)

As demonstrated by the above examples, homophones inspired by the names of renowned individuals or figures are employed for the appellations of commercial enterprises such as shops and restaurants: 花牧嵐 *huā-mù-lán* (Fig. 1(a), inspired by 花木蘭 *huā-mù-lán* 'Hua Mulan', the name of a legendary Chinese folk heroine from the Northern and Southern Dynasties era of Chinese history); 洗特樂 *xǐ-tè-lè* (Fig. 1(b), inspired by 希特勒 *xī-tè-lè* 'Adolf Hitler', the name of the dictator of Nazi Germany); 吾燕煮 *wú-yàn-zhǔ* (Fig. 1(c), inspired by 吳彥祖 *wú-yàn-zǔ* 'Daniel Wu', the name of an American actor and filmmaker based in Hong Kong); 蚵男 *kē-nán* (Fig. 1(d), inspired by 柯南 *kē-nán*, the name of a character in the manga series *Detective Conan*); and 綠巨仁 *lǜ-jù-rén* (Fig. 1(e), inspired by 綠巨人 *lǜ-jù-rén* 'the Hulk', a Marvel Comics superhero).

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means that some instances might have been classified differently by other observers. For this reason, quantitative analysis would not yield meaningful results in this context.

Fig. 1(d)

Fig. 1(e)

It is interesting to note that the five Chinese characters 洗 *xǐ*, 煮 *zhǔ*, 蚵 *kē*, 綠 *lǜ*, and 仁 *rén* in Fig. 1(b), 1(c), 1(d), and 1(e) respectively, have further suggested the nature of the goods or services offered by the shops or restaurants. Specifically, the character 洗 *xǐ* 'to wash' implies that 洗特樂 *xǐ-tè-lè* is a laundromat. The character 煮 *zhǔ* 'to boil, to poach' suggests that 吾燕煮 *wú-yàn-zhǔ* is a restaurant specializing in pot-style food. The character 蚵 *kē* 'oyster', as in 蚵南 *kē-nán*, also provides insight into the nature of the restaurant's offerings, specifically highlighting oysters as a prominent product. Finally, the two characters 綠 *lǜ* and 仁 *rén* enable customers to establish an association between themselves and the product 綠豆薏仁湯 *lǜ-dòu-yì-rén-tāng* 'sweet mung bean soup with pearl barley'.

It is also noteworthy that the name of the laundromat, 洗特樂 *xǐ-tè-lè* (Fig. 1(b)), is inspired by "Hitler," the surname of the Austrian-born German politician who ruled Nazi Germany from 1933 until his suicide in 1945. Due to his role in the Holocaust, Hitler has become a taboo in the Western world, especially in Europe. Symbolic manifestations of bygone systems of governance, including the Nazi swastika and analogous forms, have been proscribed in certain states during periods of political transition (Fijalkowski, 2014; Žalimas, 2015). Despite the evident impatience with individual accountability among many young Germans in the post-war era who seek a sense of normality unencumbered by the shadow of Hitler, the personalization or portrayal of Hitler in isolation has historically proven to be a contentious issue, or rather, one that has been deliberately circumvented (see Barnard, 2011). As M. Barnard further notes, there were once significant concerns among academics that the exhibition of Hitler's legacy could be misinterpreted as fostering or approving a craving for evil among the public, thereby providing a platform for neo-Nazis to pay homage to Hitler.

However, given the historical distance of the Holocaust – occurring as it did nearly a century ago and geographically distant from Taiwan – many Taiwanese have only a rudimentary understanding or emotional connection to the event. Indeed, as J. Mundorf and G.-M. Chen (2006) have asserted, timing, control, history, and universalism are pivotal factors in the transculturation of the seminal Nazi symbol, i.e., the swastika. This is also evidenced in the conduct of Taiwanese students who held a mock Nazi rally for a Christmas parade.[3] It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the humor inspired by homophones with Hitler is not considered to be taboo in Taiwan. To elaborate further, the prevalence of humor associated with taboo is perhaps a notable phenomenon in modern Taiwanese society (see the following sections for a more detailed discussion of this topic).

3.1.2 Institutions or venues

In the collected data, humorous signboards created based on homophones with institutions (e.g., the Legislative Yuan in Taiwan or Massachusetts Institute of Technology) or with trading venues (e.g., traditional markets) are also observed.

Fig. 2(a)

Fig. 2(b)

Fig. 2(c)

As illustrated in Fig. 2(a), 利髮院 *lì-fǎ-yuàn* is a homophone of 立法院 *lì-fǎ-yuàn*, which refers to the Legislative Yuan, the unicameral legislature of Taiwan located in Taipei. The character 髮 *fǎ* 'hair' further suggests that it is a hair salon. In Fig. 2(b), the name of the store, 麻省理工 *má-shěng-lǐ-gōng*, originally refers to Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, the mahjong tiles and the slogan "我有麻將 你有咖嗎

[3] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38437876 (accessed: 10 December 2025).

'I have mahjong, but do you have players'" suggest that it is a mahjong parlor. Specifically, the character 麻 *má* refers to 麻將 *má-jiàng* 'mahjong', and the signboard humorously presents the mahjong parlor as a higher education institution.

The most intriguing example is illustrated in Fig. 2(c), where a cartoon duck is visible, attired in a green apron containing the character 菜 *cài*. This particular duck is known as 菜奇鴨 *cài-qí-yā* and functions as a mascot for traditional markets in Tainan, being particularly exhibited in the Sakariba Kangle Market. The name of the mascot, 菜奇鴨 *cài-qí-yā* 'lit. vegetable-mystical-duck', is a homophone of the Taiwanese Hokkien 菜市仔 *tshài-tshī-á* 'wet markets'. It is a visual pun involving an image (a cartoon duck) in addition to the language (the character 菜 *cài*), of which the multiple meaning can lead the viewers to the same perception of the humor (Koestler, 1964). This mascot can be regarded as a manifestation of the sense of humor of Tainan inhabitants, imbued with the local language as its source of humor.

3.1.3 Other products or brands

The signboards in this category are created based on homophones with other products or brands, as the following two examples illustrate.

Fig. 3(a)

Fig. 3(b)

As evidenced in Fig. 3(a), the name of the establishment is 玖貳無鉛 *jiǔ-èr-wú-qiān*, which is a homophone of 九二無鉛 *jiǔ-èr-wú-qiān* 'the 92-octane unleaded gasoline'. In Fig. 3(b), the name of the restaurant is 鱔魔師 *shàn-mó-shī*, which is a homophone of 膳魔師 *shàn-mó-shī*, the brand name of Thermos, a company specializing in high-quality, insulation products intended to maintain the temperature of beverages and food for a sustained period. The character 鱔 *shàn*, referring to 'Asian swamp eels', offers further insight into the culinary specialties of the restaurant.

It is interesting to note that the establishment illustrated in Fig. 3(a) is a toy shop. The naming of the toy shop is also for the purpose of entertainment. In such toy shops, customers have the option of paying to draw lots and thereby participate in a lottery-type game with the possibility of winning. It is noteworthy that those who are deemed fortunate may be winners of toys of a higher value. However, some unscrupulous toy shop or claw machine shop owners were caught concealing the lottery tickets (籤 *qiān*) for the first prizes by YouTubers.[4] Consequently, while the shop's name, 玖貳無籤 *jiǔ-èr-wú-qiān*, is a homophone of 九二無鉛 *jiǔ-èr-wú-qiān* 'the 92-octane unleaded gasoline', the phrase 無籤 *wú-qiān*, which means 'no lottery tickets', is a tease targeted at other peer toy shops in an amusing manner.

3.2. Non-onomastic humor in street signage

3.2.1 Swear words or taboo expressions

In this category of homophonous shop names, the appellations are created based on swear words and taboo expressions. Swearing, according to S. Pinker (2008), can be categorized into five main types, namely: abusive, emphatic, dysphemistic, idiomatic, and cathartic. Of these: abusive swearing is defined as the direct insulting of another person; emphatic swearing as the use of taboo words to show shock or stress the salience of the speaker's message; dysphemistic swearing as the use of unpleasantly offensive language; idiomatic swearing as the use of provocative language to pique interest; and cathartic swearing as an unintentional verbal response to a negative event.

Fig. 4(a)

Fig. 4(b)

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fa79fYmNCNw (accessed: 10 December 2025).

As can be seen in Fig. 4(a), the shop name is 混蛋 *hùn-dàn*, which literally means ‘mixed eggs’ and is originally used to refer to an unreasonable person or a bad guy and was subsequently adopted as a swear word equivalent to ‘bastard’. However, as the accompanying visual image illustrates, this shop is in fact a capsule toy store where customers can purchase 扭蛋 *niǔ-dàn*, which literally means ‘to twist an egg; capsule toy’. The utilization of 混蛋 *hùn-dàn* to refer to 扭蛋 *niǔ-dàn* is indicative of the operational mechanism of a capsule toy machine in a humorous manner. That is to say, a capsule toy machine contains a variety of capsule toys, like mixed eggs, and customers may obtain one by chance. On the other hand, the restaurant name 你佬司 *nǐ-lǎo-sī* in Fig. 4(b) is a homophone with 恁老師 *lín-lāu-su* ‘your teacher’. This is a euphemism for the modern Taiwanese Hokkien swearing 姦恁老師 *kàn-lín-lāu-su* ‘fuck your teacher’,[5] with the character 司 *sī* indicating the products 吐司 *tǔ-sī* ‘toast’.

It is evident that taboo expressions are also employed in the naming of shops, which are similarly based on homophones. As S. Yang (2009) contends, within the Chinese cultural context, death, sex, and bodily functions are considered to be significant taboo issues. Consequently, phenomena that may result in death or misery, such as ill health, economic disadvantage, misfortune, or the loss of possessions or valuable items, are also a source of fear and discomfort. As a result, there is a general reluctance to utilize language that pertains to these taboo areas. Nevertheless, as the subsequent examples illustrate, illness and death are not taboo in the linguistic landscape of Tainan.

Fig. 4(c)

Fig. 4(d)

As illustrated in Fig. 4(c), 藤柳杯 *téng-liǔ-bēi* is a homophone with 糖尿病 *thn̂g-jiō-pēnn*, which is Taiwanese Hokkien for ‘diabetes’. Meanwhile, 拍咪壓 *pāi-mī-yā* (Fig. 4(d)) is a homophone with 歹物仔 *pháinn-mih-á*, which is also Taiwanese

[5] As stated by W.-L. Liu (2016, p. 30), this particular swear, in addition to others, is frequently employed in Taiwan among friends for the purpose of greeting one another, serving as a symbol of intimacy.

Hokkien for ‘bad stuff’. These two instances of homophony are derived from Taiwanese Hokkien, and their humor is rooted in the utilization of taboo homophones, particularly those associated with chronic diseases or death. Note that 歹物仔 *pháinn-mih-á* ‘bad stuff’ functions as a euphemism for “ghost,” which is often associated with death. The homophones from Taiwanese Hokkien further underscore the distinct local identity of the citizens of Tainan.

3.2.2. Formulaic expressions

According to J. Shao (2016), Mandarin formulaic expressions encompass idioms, proverbs, collocations, and two-part allegorical sayings. The majority of formulaic expressions are presented in four syllables, as Mandarin speakers habitually group two or four syllables as a unit during the production or perception of an utterance (Lu, 1956). In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, many of the signboards are based on homophones with four-character formulaic expressions, as evidenced by the following examples.

Fig. 5(a)

Fig. 5(b)

Fig. 5(c)

As illustrated in Fig. 5(a)–5(j), the signboards are presented in four-character formulaic expressions, with one or two characters denoting the products. For instance, in Fig. 5(a), 123飾 *yī-èr-sān-shì* is a homophone of 1234 *yī-èr-sān-sì*, and the character 飾 *shì* refers to 飾品 *shì-pǐn* ‘accessories’, implying what the shop sells. In Fig. 5(b), 雞不可失 *jī-bù-kě-shī* is a homophone of 機不可失 *jī-bù-kě-shī* ‘it is now or never’, with the character 雞 *jī* ‘chicken’ indicating the deep-fried chicken steak as its product. In Fig. 5(c), the name of the establishment, 白面酥生 *bái-miàn-sū-shēng*, is a homophone of 白面書生 *bái-miàn-shū-shēng* ‘a young, handsome and inexperienced intellectual’.

The character 酥 *sū*, meaning ‘flaky pastry’, alludes to the shop’s mille-feuille specialty. In Fig. 5(d), 麵向八方 *miàn-xiàng-bā-fāng* is a homophone of 面向八方 *miàn-xiàng-bā-fāng* ‘facing in all directions’, with the character 麵 *miàn* ‘noodles’ indicating that it is a restaurant specializing in noodle dishes. In Fig. 5(e), 非常ㄐㄧ車 *fēi-cháng-jī-chē* is a homophone of 非常機車 *fēi-cháng-jī-chē* ‘a pain in the butt’. The character 車 *chē* ‘vehicles’ indicates that the establishment trades in scooters, and the employment of the two Mandarin phonetic symbols (注音符號, *zhùyīn fúhào*) ㄐㄧ further asserts its Taiwanese identity, as they are used exclusively in Taiwan.

Fig. 5(d)

Fig. 5(e)

Fig. 5(f)

Fig. 5(g)

Fig. 5(h)

Fig. 5(i)

Fig. 5(j)

As further seen in Fig. 5(f)–5(h), the signboards feature the character 衣 *yī* 'clothes', suggesting a connection between the shops and clothing. In Fig. 5(f), 衣塵不染 *yī-chén-bù-rǎn* is a homophone of 一塵不染 *yī-chén-bù-rǎn* 'spotlessly clean', which further reinforces the effectiveness of the laundry service. In Fig. 5(g), 衣年衫班 *yī-nián-shān-bān* is a homophone of 一年三班 *yī-nián-sān-bān* 'Class Three, Grade One'. While both 衣*yī* 'clothes' and 衫 *shān* 'blouse, shirt' suggest that it is a shop selling clothes, the use of the Mandarin phonetic symbols conveys the humor and echoes 一年三班 *yī-nián-sān-bān* due to the fact that Mandarin phonetic symbols are learnt in primary schools by first graders. A similar linguistic phenomenon can be observed in Fig. 5(h), where 衣衣不捨 *yī-yī-bù-shě* is a homophone of 依依不捨 *yī-yī-bù-shě* 'reluctant to leave'. The character 衣 *yī* 'clothes' also serves as a representation of the products sold in the shop.

It is interesting to note that the signboards seen in Fig. 5(i) and 5(j) are homophones of formulaic expressions that indicate a crime or show negative work attitude to create humor. For instance, 飯賣人口 *fàn-mài-rén-kǒu* is a homophone of 販賣人口 *fàn-mài-rén-kǒu* 'human trafficking', although the character 飯 *fàn* 'cooked rice' indicates that fried rice is the product. In Fig. 5(j), conversely, 好想摸魚 *hǎo-xiǎng-mō-yú* colloquially signifies the desire to slack off during work. This formulaic expression, however, contains 魚 *yú* 'fish', which suggests boiled fish with pickled cabbage and chili as its product.

The signboards exhibited in Fig. 5(a)–5(j) are composed of four characters, which are homophonous with formulaic expressions. L.-C. Chen (2022) argues for the prevalence of quadrisyllabic (non)formulaic expressions among gay Taiwanese men as a means of referring to a single event, which may in turn encompass several subevents. This linguistic phenomenon is driven by the objective of achieving a humorous effect

while concurrently asserting "sexual modernity," a concept that has been previously theorized by K. Hall (2019) to demonstrate the creativity, knowledge and eloquence of sexual minority groups. In light of this, the use of the four-character signboards that are homophones of formulaic expressions can be viewed as reflecting the playful creativity of Tainan inhabitants.

Notably, a significant number of signboards in Tainan feature three or two characters, which also serve as homophonous formulaic expressions, employed for humorous effect.

Fig. 5(k)

Fig. 5(l)

Fig. 5(m)

Fig. 5(n)

Fig. 5(o)

Fig. 5(p)

Fig. 5(q)

As demonstrated by the above examples, the signboards comprise either three or two characters, and are homophonous with formulaic expressions. In Fig. 5(k), 敝姓鍋 *bì-xìng-guō* is a homophone of 敝姓郭 *bì-xìng-guō* 'my surname is Kuo', which is humble speech for self-introduction during a first meeting. The character 鍋 *guō* 'pot' indicates that the restaurant specializes in hot pot cuisines. In Fig. 5(l), 剪便宜 *jiǎn-pián-yí* is a homophone of 撿便宜 *jiǎn-pián-yí* 'bargain hunting', of which the character 剪 *jiǎn*

'to cut' indicates it is a barber shop. In Fig. 5(m), 薏+仁 *yì-jiā-rén* is a homophone of 一家人 *yì-jiā-rén* 'the whole family', with the two characters 薏仁 *yì-rén* 'pearl barley' indicating its product. In Fig. 5(n), 見個面 *jiàn-ge-miàn* originally means 'meeting with someone', and the character 面 *miàn* 'face' is a homophone of 麵 *miàn* 'noodles', indicating noodles as the restaurant's specialty. In Fig. 5(o), 啡常站 *fēi-cháng-zhàn* is a homophone of 非常讚 *fēi-cháng-zàn* 'very good', with 啡 *fēi* indicating the beverage shop sells 咖啡 *kā-fēi* 'coffee'.

Fig. 5(r)

Fig. 5(s)

Fig. 5(t)

It is interesting to note that in Fig. 5(p), 五鮮級 *wǔ-xiān-jí* is a homophone of 五星級 *wǔ-xīng-jí* 'five-star'. Despite the fact that the character 鮮 *xiān* 'fresh' does not imply what the restaurant offers, it suggests that all the ingredients are fresh and the food is of a five-star standard. In Fig. 5(q), 恬飽味 *tián-bǎo-wèi* is a homophone of 填飽胃 *tián-bǎo-wèi* 'fill up (one's) stomach'. While it does not reveal the culinary offerings of the restaurant, the name itself suggests an abundance of food, thereby creating an impression of satisfaction for diners. A similar linguistic phenomenon is observed in Fig. 5(r), where 不餓門 *bú-è-mén* is a homophone of the Buddhist term 不二門 *bú-èr-mén* (or 不二法門 *bú-èr-fǎ-mén*), signifying 'the way to the absolute truth'. The two characters, 不餓 *bú-è* 'not hungry', can be humorously interpreted as implying a place where hunger can be satiated.

Finally, in Fig. 5(s), 轉餃 *zhuǎn-jiǎo* is a homophone of 轉角 *zhuǎn-jiǎo* 'corner', with the character 餃 *jiǎo* 'dumplings' suggesting the restaurant's specialty. Intriguingly, in Fig. 5(t), the name of the shop, namely 一筒兩餅 *yì-tǒng-liǎng-bǐng*, is a homophone of mahjong terms. In the context of mahjong, the term "筒 *tǒng* 'tube'" is employed to denote "the Circle" in mahjong tiles, while the Chinese term "餅 *bǐng* 'cookie, cake'" is also used for the same purpose due to its resemblance to a large round cookie.

It is evident that the shop name 一筒兩餅 *yì-tǒng-liǎng-bǐng* 'one tube and two cookies', within the context of mahjong, can be interpreted as the One Circle tile (a large circle of multiple colours) and the Two Circle tile consisting of a green and a blue circle. The character 餅 *bǐng* further suggests its products (i.e., meat pies) in a humorous manner.

In conclusion, as formulaic expressions are becoming increasingly prevalent in everyday interactions, the use of homophones of formulaic expressions is not only entertaining, but also has the capacity to create a lasting impression on customers and guests.

3.2.3 Phonetic borrowing

In the process of integrating English words into the Mandarin lexicon, there is a reciprocal shift between semantic and phonetic modes of expression (Lu, 2022). A notable example of this is the adoption of the word "vitamin" in the 1920s as a phonetic loan, derived from the Chinese characters for "sustain + his + life" (維他命 *wéi-tā-mìng*). This was subsequently modified to 維生素 *wéi-shēng-sù*, which literally translates to "sustaining + life + substance" (Lu, 2022, p. 8)

Similarly, a variety of humorous signboards have been created based on homophones, through the process of phonetic borrowing from foreign language greetings. Given the close geographical proximity of Japan and Thailand to Taiwan, the Japanese and Thai greetings are well known, and consequently, the creation of signboards inspired by these greetings is commonplace. Such signboards are created with the intention of creating an impression in an entertaining way, as we can see in the following examples.

Fig. 6(a)

Fig. 6(b)

As illustrated in Fig. 6(a), the borrowing of 嗨咾 *hāi-yòu* from the Japanese greeting おはよう *ohayō* ‘good morning’ is evident. In Fig. 6(b), 弐碗豬腳 *sān-wǎn-zhū-jiǎo* is used to denote ‘three bowls of pork knuckle’. However, when pronounced in Taiwanese Hokkien, it should read 三碗豬跤 *sann uánn tinn-khann*. This pronunciation is reminiscent of the greeting used in the Thai language, **สวัสดีครับ** *sà-wàt-dee kráp*, which is used by men, and **สวัสดีค่ะ** *sà-wàt-dee kâ*, which is used by women.

In addition to Japanese and Thai, some humorous signboards are based on homophonous borrowing from English with semantic extension.

Fig. 6(c)

Fig. 6(d)

It is evident in Fig. 6(c) that 麻CHILL *má-chill* is a homophone of the Taiwanese Hokkien 麻雀 *muâ-tshok* ‘mahjong’. The English word “CHILL” is indicative of the fact that the mahjong parlor is a place for chilling and relaxing. In a similar manner, in Fig. 6(d), 什麼都my *shé-me-dōu-my* is a homophone of 什麼都買 *shé-me-dōu-mǎi* ‘to buy everything’. The employment of the English possessive “my” also implies that those who visit the shop can procure what they desire. The borrowing of English words serves not only to create humor through the imitation of sounds, but also to demonstrate semantic implications.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, it has been observed that a significant number of entertaining signboards are created based on homophones with positive Taiwanese Hokkien expressions. While these signboards are capable of creating humor, they also highlight *tai*-ness.

Fig. 6(e)

Fig. 6(f)

Fig. 6(g)

Fig. 6(h)

Fig. 6(i)

As illustrated in Fig. 6(e)–6(g), the character 呷 *xiá* bears a striking resemblance to 甲 *jiǎ*, a homophone of the Taiwanese Hokkien 食 *tsiȧh* 'to eat'. The square 口 *kǒu* on the left is designated as the mouth radical, thereby further suggesting the act of eating. Consequently, the signboards depicted in Fig. 6(e)–6(g) imply a correlation between the establishments and food. Indeed, 呷厝味 *xiá-cuò-wèi* in Fig. 6(e) is a snack bar, and in Fig. 6(f) it is a commercial kitchen space for rent, and the name is borrowed from the

Taiwanese Hokkien 真趣味 *tsin tshù-bī* ‘really interesting’ for an entertaining effect. In addition, 呷霸 *xiá-bà* (Fig. 6(g)) is a homophone of 食飽 *tsia̍h pá*, which means ‘to have a full stomach’. Again, this creates humor.

A closer inspection of Fig. 6(h) reveals the borrowing of 熊賀家 *xióng-hè-jiā* from the Taiwanese Hokkien 常好食 *siông hó-tsia̍h*, a phrase denoting ‘very tasty’. Similarly, 熊賀 *xióng-hè* is derived from the Taiwanese Hokkien 常好 *siông hó*, conveying the sense of ‘very good’. As can be discerned from the other characters on the signboards (i.e., 海鮮熱炒 *hǎixiān rèchǎo* ‘seafood stir-fry’), Fig. 6(h) is a seafood restaurant, and Fig. 6(i) is a spicy hot pot restaurant. The restaurant names have been created using the local language, leading to the incorporation of humor.

The naming of these commercial establishments is not solely attributable to the process of phonetic borrowing from Taiwanese Hokkien: the designation of names also serves to highlight the strength of the products or services in an entertaining manner.

Fig. 6(j)

Fig. 6(k)

It is evident from Fig. 6(j) that 金多粒 *jīn-duō-lì* is a homophone of the Taiwanese Hokkien 真濟粒 *tsin tsē lia̍p* ‘a large number of’, which suggests that the products, i.e., betelnuts, offer exceptional value for money. In Fig. 6(k), “究Sho” *jiù-sho* is a homophone of the Taiwanese Hokkien 足燒 *tsiok sio* ‘very hot’, which in turn indicates that the products, i.e., the ramen soup, are cooked on the spot at the ideal temperature. Finally, in Fig. 6(l), 金富足 *jīn-fù-zú* is a homophone of the Taiwanese Hokkien 真富足 *tsin hù-tsiok* ‘very rich’, with the character 足 *zú* ‘foot’ indicating that it is a foot and body massage parlor.

Fig. 6(l)

In conclusion, the above three signboards demonstrate that the naming inspired by the local language communicates the strength of the products or service in an amusing tone. As Taiwanese Hokkien is the predominant language in Tainan (Ang, 2019a; 2019b), the creation of signboards inspired by this local language has the dual effect of impressing customers and guests while simultaneously communicating humor that is comprehensible to the local residents. This, in turn, fosters a sense of ingroup solidarity among the inhabitants of Tainan.

3.2.4. Grammatical ambiguity

D. Zhu (1980) asserts that grammatical ambiguity is the phenomenon of a sentence possessing multiple meanings. More specifically, a sentence is termed "polysemous" if it exhibits multiple meanings. Additionally, two kinds of polysemous sentences are distinguished. One is a sentence in which a word is polysemous and therefore the sentence is accordingly polysemous. The second kind is a grammatically polysemous sentence.

In the linguistic landscape of Tainan, it has been observed that the creation of signboards is inspired by grammatical ambiguity. To elaborate, the ambiguous sentence employed as the name of the establishment is predicated on the polysemy of the word 早點 *zǎo-diǎn*.

The word 早點 *zǎo-diǎn* is ambiguous due to its polysemy. When used as a noun, 早點 *zǎo-diǎn* denotes 'breakfast'; when used as an adverb, it signifies 'early'. As illustrated in Fig. 7(a), the name of the establishment 早點到 *zǎo-diǎn-dào* can be interpreted as either 'the breakfast arrives' or 'to arrive early'. Similarly, in Fig. 7(b), while most native speakers of Mandarin may interpret the name of the establishment 早點見面 *zǎo-diǎn-jiàn-miàn* as 'to meet early', this designation can also be interpreted as 'to meet during breakfast'. Both examples are likely to evoke a knowing smile among those familiar with Mandarin.

Fig. 7(a)

Fig. 7(b)

3.2.5. Address forms

Address forms can be viewed as "a speaker's linguistic reference to his/her interlocutors" (Braun, 1988, p. 7). According to L. Dunkling (1990), the employment of address forms serves to convey the speaker's attitude towards the addressee, achieving optimal efficacy when the sentiment is of profound emotion, marked by exceptional warmth, or marked by intense scorn.

In investigating the linguistic landscape of Tainan, it has been observed that some signboards are created based on homophones with certain address forms, of which particular characters are indicative of the products or the service provided. Furthermore, some shop names are inspired by the products pronounced in Taiwanese Hokkien, thereby conveying humor.

As illustrated in Fig. 8(a), 牛氓 *niú-máng* is a homophone with 流氓 *liú-máng*, an address form used for hooligans or villains. The character 牛 *niú* implies the offer of beef soup or other beef-based culinary delights. In Fig. 8(b), 艾斯机膜 *ài-sī-jī-mó* is a homophone with 愛斯基摩 *ài-sī-jī-mó* 'Eskimo', an exonym that refers to the Inuit and the Yupik (or Yuit) of eastern Siberia and Alaska. The term "Eskimo" is widely considered derogatory by people in the Arctic, as it was historically employed by racist settlers. The characters 机 *jī* 'device' and 膜 *mó* 'screen protector' further imply the services provided. In both cases, the names of the establishments can be viewed as humorously indicating the products or services offered to customers or guests.

Fig. 8(a)

Fig. 8(b)

Fig. 8(c)

It is interesting to note the example in Fig. 8(c), in which 轟爸 *hōng-bà* 'lit. Dad Hong', at first sight, is an address form based on kinship terms. However, the name of the snack bar is a homophone with 封肉 *hong-bah*, which is a specific type of pork

cuisine, namely the meat from the belly of the pig, characterized by higher fat content and the presence of esters. The signboard's humorous juxtaposition of these two concepts serves both to highlight the culinary specialties on offer and foster a sense of intimacy with the diners.

B. Liu (2024) and Y. Liu and M. Liu (2024) have further explored the manner in which E-commerce live-streamers in China engage with their audience, identifying the intimate nature of this interaction. The use of kinship terms (or affectionate nickname terms) such as 家人們 *jiā-rén-men* 'families', 姐妹們 *jiě-mèi-men* 'sisters', 寶寶們 *bǎo-bǎo-men* 'babies', or 寶子們 *bǎo-zi-men* 'dear ones', has been observed to facilitate a sense of intimacy and closeness between the live-streamer and their audience. As Z. Ye (2013; 2017) explains, terms such as the above function as new forms of address in Chinese digital communication, and can be understood if we consider the interactional patterns in China. The four social categories of 生人 *shēng-rén* 'a stranger', 熟人 *shú-rén* 'a familiar person', 自己人 *zì-jǐ-rén* 'an ingroup member', and 外人 *wài-rén* 'an outsider/an outgroup member' form concentric circles, which extend from the speaker or the ego to other individuals. The cultural script theory provides a compelling explanation for the use of these address forms, suggesting that they are consistent with the 自己人 *zì-jǐ-rén* 'an ingroup member' communicative style.

In a similar manner, the employment of kinship terms in the creation of signboards serves to convey intimacy. When diners are seated at the snack bar, they experience a sense of familiarity and a sense of being at home. The humorous juxtaposition of "Dad Hong" and "pork belly" serves to further create an impression on both frequent and potential diners.

4. DISCUSSION

H.-Ho et al. (2018) note that signboards in Taiwan's urban areas are found to include not only Mandarin but also Taiwanese Hokkien and foreign languages. As I maintain in my argument, this linguistic phenomenon reflects the process of "glocalization" of signage in Tainan. Given the presence of multilingualism in Taiwan (Sloboda, 2024), a significant proportion of the humor is derived from the use of Taiwanese Hokkien. Furthermore, the utilization of swear words and taboo expressions in shop names is indicative of a Taiwanese propensity to embrace the use of such linguistic elements for the sake of humorous effect. The use of Taiwanese Hokkien in the linguistic landscape of Tainan has been shown to elicit a humorous effect, which can be attributed to the language's conflictual nature.

A recent YouTube video by Siri Lee, a vocalist from Tainan, Taiwan, exemplifies this by using Taiwanese Hokkien to teach French pronunciation. The video features local entities and daily necessities in Taiwanese Hokkien, including 屜仔 *thuh-á* 'drawer', 拖仔 *thua-á* 'slippers', 櫥仔 *tû-á* 'cabinet', and 米酒頭仔 *bí-tsiú-thâu-á* 'rice wine', etc., which are pronounced in French accent (*thuh-á* → *t'quoa*; *thua-á* → *troi'a*; *tû-á* → *trua*; *bí-tsiú-thâu-á* → *ouïe je troua*) to form a French song in a light, airy, and rustic tone

frequently heard in cafés (see Fig. 9).[6] The juxtaposition of the stereotypical perception of Taiwanese Hokkien as a vulgar language used by less educated people and women without *qizhi* (see Su, 2008) and the elegance and languor conveyed by French is perhaps the source of humor. Despite the progress made in challenging these long-standing perceptions in Taiwan, and the emergence of Taiwanese Hokkien as a source of inspiration for music creation, as exemplified by Siri Lee's works, the conflict between the local distinctiveness embodied by Taiwanese Hokkien and the international appeal represented by French persists, and this further creates humor.

Fig. 9

At this juncture, the predominance of homophones, as evidenced by the linguistic landscape of Tainan, potentially exemplifies what M. Bakhtin (1984 [1965]) characterizes as "linguistic carnivalesque." This linguistic carnivalesque manifests itself with considerable frequency in the context of Asian Pride events. For instance, Pride in Phnom Penh incorporates carnival elements into its Tuk-Tuk Race, showcasing the pervasive influence of commercial and tourist forces within Cambodia's state-sanctioned national imaginary (Rowlett & Go, 2024). Indeed, Taiwan has become a highly democratized society that values individual creativity, accommodates unconventional structures, and even permits the subversion of formalities.

Findings also suggest that some of the characters are used as product identifiers or to highlight strengths of the products. Specifically, the characters employed as nouns denote the products, while those used as verbs signify the manufacturing process. The perception of characters has further revealed how humorous street signage is conceptualized.

[6] https://www.youtube.com/shorts/gsc-cf0lYPM (accessed: 10 December 2025).

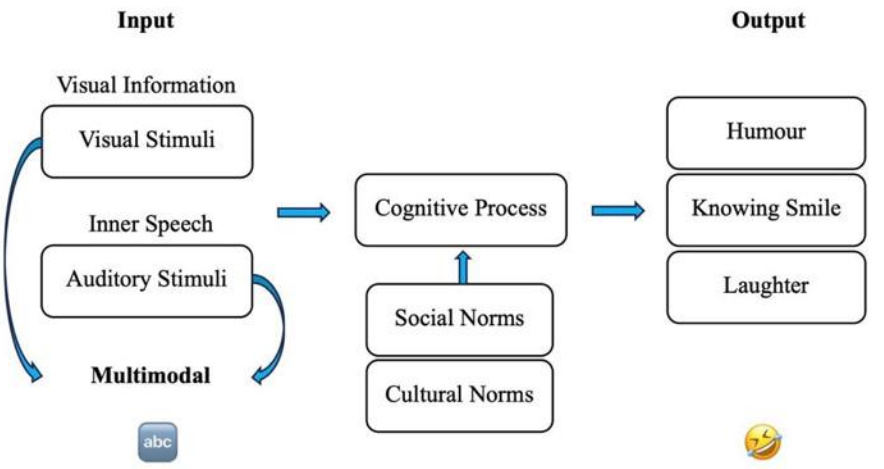

Fig. 10

As demonstrated in Fig. 10, humor recipients initially engage with visual stimuli, such as textual and/or semiotics displayed on signboards, which they then internally process without vocalizing. During the cognitive process, social and cultural norms are incorporated into the perception of humorous content. Finally, at the output stage, humor is experienced, which may further evoke a knowing smile or laughter.

5. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed 173 examples of humorous street signage in Tainan using a linguistic landscape approach, identifying two broad categories: onomastic-based humor, which plays on proper names such as names of people or figures, institutions or venues, and other products or brands; and non-onomastic humor, which draws on swear words or taboo expressions, formulaic expressions, phonetic borrowing, grammatical ambiguity, and address forms. The findings show that homophony is the dominant humor strategy, often facilitated by the use of Taiwanese Hokkien. This reflects Tainan's glocalised and multilingual linguistic landscape, while also revealing a tendency to subvert linguistic norms for playful, creative purposes. Such humor functions both as entertainment and as a tool for social commentary, resonating with M. Bakhtin's (1984 [1965]) concept of the linguistic carnivalesque and M. Douglas's (1968) view of humor as a symbolic challenge to prevailing systems of control, fostering a sense of personal freedom within the community. It also reflects a broader cultural disposition toward playfulness and linguistic creativity in Taiwanese society (cf. Chen, 2016; 2017).

To sum up, by embedding humor in public signage, Tainan's streetscape becomes a site where linguistic creativity, cultural identity, and everyday commerce intersect. This playful linguistic practice not only enlivens the urban environment but also embodies

a distinctive Taiwanese openness to informality and innovation. While the present study is based on data collected during the summer of 2024, a return visit to Tainan in 2025 revealed noticeable changes in the city's signage. Although the use of homophonic wordplay remains prevalent, the specific expressions and designs have evolved. Future research could therefore adopt a diachronic approach to examine how humorous street signage changes over time, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and urban life.

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Humorystyczne szyldy uliczne w Tainan: analiza krajobrazu językowego

Słowa kluczowe: homofonia, humor, krajobraz językowy, oznakowanie, Tainan.

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejsze badanie podejmuje analizę humorystycznych szyldów ulicznych w Tainan – mieście o statusie specjalnej jednostki administracyjnej w południowym Tajwanie, powszechnie postrzeganym jako jedno z najstarszych miast kraju oraz istotny ośrodek dziedzictwa kulturowego i lokalnej pamięci historycznej. Wychodząc od założeń krajobrazu językowego (*linguistic landscape*), badanie koncentruje się na tym, w jaki sposób humor zostaje wkomponowany w przestrzeń publiczną oraz jak odzwierciedla relacje między językiem, kulturą a lokalną tożsamością. Materiał empiryczny, zebrany w sierpniu i wrześniu 2024 roku, obejmuje łącznie 173 fotograficzne zapisy humorystycznych szyldów, które następnie poddano analizie pod kątem zastosowanych strategii humoru i ich osadzenia w szerszym kontekście społeczno-kulturowym oraz językowym. Wyniki wskazują, iż humorystyczne komunikaty obecne w przestrzeni Tainan najczęściej opierają się na kreatywnym wykorzystaniu homofonii. Zidentyfikowano dwa główne typy tego rodzaju gry językowej. Pierwszy obejmuje humor onomastyczny, bazujący na nazwach własnych (osób, instytucji, miejsc, marek itp.). Drugi typ odnosi się do humoru nieonomastycznego, który wykorzystuje homofonię w odniesieniu do przekleństw, wyrażeń tabu, formuł językowych, zapożyczeń fonetycznych, dwuznaczności gramatycznych czy form adresatywnych. Częste współwystępowanie tajwańskiego hokkien, mandaryńskiego i języków obcych tworzy zlokalizowany krajobraz językowy o cechach glokalnych, w którym lokalna mowa funkcjonuje obok wpływów globalnych. Humor często wynika z kontrastu między kolokwialnym, niekiedy postrzeganym jako wulgarny, tajwańskim hokkien a bardziej oficjalnymi rejestrami językowymi, co prowadzi do komicznego efektu wynikającego z ich lingwistycznej nieadekwatności. Dominacja gier słownych i językowej dezynwoltury znajduje odzwierciedlenie w pojęciu „karnawałowości językowej” Bakhtina (1984 [1965]), w której język burzy porządek norm i hierarchii. Humorystyczne szyldy w Tainan stanowią zatem nie tylko narzędzie marketingu, lecz także wyraz kulturowej ekspresji, będący formą sprzeciwu wobec formalnych porządków językowych i społecznych, a zarazem świadectwem lokalnej kreatywności, dystansu i tożsamości.