

Strategic Verbal Humour in Political Leadership: A Case Study of Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed

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Abstract

This research is a pioneering exploration into the strategic use of verbal humour by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, a prominent figure in Malaysian politics renowned for his tenure as the twice-elected Prime Minister. Through qualitative content analysis, this study examines excerpts from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's first press conference after being sworn in as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister to classify the types of verbal humour he employs. The analysis reveals a multifaceted use of humour, encompassing self-deprecating humour, sarcasm, hyperbole, and irony, each serving distinct communicative and rhetorical functions. Importantly, these forms of humour are not used haphazardly but strategically. Self-deprecating humour, for instance, emerges as a tool for humanising the leader, making him more relatable and approachable despite past criticisms of his authoritative leadership style. Sarcasm and hyperbolic humour are identified as mechanisms for critiquing media representation and emphasising political support, effectively challenging prevailing narratives with wit and satire. The irony, interwoven with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's discourse, subtly underscores the complexities of political communication, media interactions, and public engagement in the Malaysian context. The findings emphasise the complexity of humour as a strategic communication tool in leadership, illustrating its potential to enhance relatability, negotiate public image, and engage in political critique. This paper makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on political communication and leadership by highlighting the nuanced role of humour in political discourse, demonstrating how it can be skillfully deployed to navigate the intricacies of leadership and public perception. Through the lens of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed's political career, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between humour, politics, and leadership in a diverse socio-political landscape.

1. Introduction

Humour, often seen as the lighter side of communication, holds profound implications for political leadership and public relations, entertaining and conveying messages, softening criticism, and humanising leaders. This paper embarks on a pioneering analysis of verbal humour by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the twice-serving Prime Minister of Malaysia, renowned for his sharp wit and distinctive style in political speeches and press conferences. Through the lens of his illustrious career, this paper seeks to categorise the types of verbal humour utilised by

Tun Mahathir and explore the roles these humour types play in political communication, leadership perception, and public engagement.

Given Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed's pivotal role in shaping Malaysian politics and governance, his adept use of humour underscores a deliberate communicative strategy that merits scholarly attention. This research aims to dissect the layers of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed's humour, grounding its analysis in theoretical frameworks of humour studies and political communication. By examining instances of humour in his first press conference as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister, this study proposes to classify them into identifiable humour types, such as satire, irony, and anecdote, aligning them with their respective functions.

1.1 Types of Verbal Humour

Verbal humour encompasses various types, each leveraging linguistic features and social dynamics to elicit laughter or amusement. Here are summaries of the different types of verbal humour supported by recent research and findings in the field. For one thing, puns and wordplay use ambiguity and phonetic similarities to elicit humour through multiple interpretations of a word or phrase. Studies highlight the role of puns and wordplay in creating positive communication effects and their pragmatic characteristics (Gao & Ren, 2013; Attardo, 2020). Next is sarcasm and irony, which use contradiction between the literal and intended meanings to critique or mock. Research has analysed the nuances between sarcasm and irony, showing that sarcasm often carries a more biting tone (Toplak & Katz, 2000; Ling & Klinger, 2016). The other forms of verbal humour are anecdotes and jokes, which are narrative forms that entertain through structured storytelling, often concluding with a punchline. Recent studies have explored the processing of anecdotes and jokes, emphasising their interactional utility and the activation of meaning (Jyotsna Vaid et al., 2003).

Meanwhile, satire critiques societal norms or political contexts, while parody mimics comedic effects. Research in this area focuses on understanding the mechanisms of satire and parody as critical and humorous tools (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993; Sheps, 2023). Hyperbole is another type of verbal humour. It is an exaggeration for comedic effect. Studies show how hyperbole influences the timing and delivery of jokes, contributing to humour through exaggeration and unexpectedness (Jyotsna Vaid et al., 2003).

On the other hand, self-deprecating humour happens when a speaker makes fun of himself in a humorous and often relatable way. Research in this area investigates the impacts of self-deprecating humour on interpersonal dynamics and self-perception (Yi, 2022). Next is wit, which refers to quick and intelligent humour that relies on verbal dexterity and timing. While direct studies on wit are less common, its presence is acknowledged across humorous discourse as a sign of cleverness and mental agility. Finally, observational humour derives from everyday situations, often pointing out absurdities in shared experiences. Studies have examined how observational humour plays a role in communication and engagement, revealing societal norms and behaviours through comedic observation (Jin & Wang, 2012).

2. Materials and Methods

In order to dissect Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's use of verbal humour, the researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis of selected extracts from his first press conference after he was officially appointed as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister. His appointment is historical in the Malaysian political scenario. For one thing, it was the first time a former prime minister was re-elected for the second time. More significantly, it was the first time in sixty years that the Barisan Nasional had lost a general election and paved the way for the Tun Mahathir-led Pakatan Harapan to come into power.

The selected extracts were identified as humorous based on a posting in the Discover KL blog entitled '9 Witty Quotes from ItTun Dr Mahathir that Have Caught Our Attention' (DiscoverKL, 2018). The posting was published on 11 May 2018, three days after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed was appointed Prime Minister. Despite the title, the blog posting did not specifically classify the types of humour and analysed the purpose of the witty remarks that the former prime minister uttered during the press conference.

Using a taxonomy derived from humour studies literature, such as the work of Wang and Yang (2019) on the broader implications of leader humour and the findings by Neves and Karagonlar (2020) on humour styles (Wang & Yang, 2019; Neves & Karagonlar, 2020), the researcher classified each instance of humour into identifiable categories.

3. Results and Discussion

This research selected four extracts from Tun Dr Mahathir's first press conference (presented in italics) on 10 May 2018 after being sworn in as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister.

"Members of the press, firstly, thank you very much for your patience. We have taken a little bit more time than expected. Slightly about 6 hours more".

For the record, before being officially declared the new Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed had to wait while the king interviewed the leaders of the four parties in his coalition. The latter invited the 92-year-old to form the next government and add to his 22 years of experience leading the country.

This extract from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's opening speech to the press can be classified primarily as self-deprecating humour. By acknowledging the delay in a lighthearted manner ("*Slightly about 6 hours more*"), he not only attempts to lighten the mood but also humbly acknowledges the inconvenience caused to the members of the press. This approach serves multiple purposes:

Relatability: This humour makes Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed appear more relatable and human to his audience. Humorously acknowledging imperfections or minor faults can make a leader seem more accessible and down-to-earth.

Tension Release: Humor can serve as a valuable tool to diffuse potential tension in any situation where frustration due to delays might occur. Tun Dr Mahathir helps mitigate his audience's annoyance by making light of the situation and redirecting potential criticism into a shared laugh.

Rapport Building: Building rapport with the press is a strategic move. Recognising and addressing the prolonged wait upfront with humour signals respect for the audience's time and patience, fostering a positive atmosphere even before he begins conveying his message.

Such utilisation of self-deprecating humour highlights Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's adeptness at using verbal humour as a tactical communication tool in leadership. It exemplifies how leaders can employ humour to manage their public perception, engage constructively with the media, and navigate the complexities of interpersonal and public communications effectively.

"In the flag war we lost. We lost the flag war completely. But they can have the flags, we prefer the votes."

This extract showcases Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed employing satirical humour combined with a tinge of irony. Here is an analysis based on these types of verbal humour:

Satirical Humor: Satire involves the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticise people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. In this statement, Tun Dr Mahathir uses satire to address the "flag war", a common phenomenon in political campaigns where opposing parties compete to display as many of their flags as possible in public spaces. By saying, "In the flag war we lost. We lost the flag disarmingly, acknowledging their defeat in this symbolic battle war completely," he critiques the superficial nature of such contests, implying that political success should not be measured by the number of flags displayed but by the substantive support of the electorate.

Irony: This statement is also deeply ironic. Irony typically involves saying the opposite of what is meant, using sarcasm or understatement to highlight a contrast between expectations and reality. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's expression, "But they can have the flags; we *prefer the votes*", turns the concept of losing on its head. While superficially conceding defeat in one aspect (the flag war), he implicitly claims victory where it truly matters (winning votes), thus underlining the irrelevance of the flag war compared to the actual election outcome.

Analysis:

This quote artfully combines satire and irony to communicate a critical viewpoint on political campaigning tactics, highlighting the distinction between superficial support indicators (such as the number of flags) and actual electoral success. It exemplifies Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's use of humour to convey political messages, engaging the audience with a witty remark while simultaneously critiquing the focus on symbolic victories over substantive ones. This approach demonstrates his political acumen and reinforces his leadership persona as one that prioritises genuine achievements over mere appearances.

This nuanced use of humour reflects a sophisticated understanding of political dynamics and human psychology. It showcases how verbal humour can be strategically utilised in leadership and communication to effectively engage the public and succinctly make poignant observations about electoral politics.

"Before Najib announced the dissolution of parliament, we were expecting between 5000-8000 people (to turn up). But after he announced that he was going to dissolve it and said that the election will be held very soon, the number of people who turned up increased to, at times, 40,000 people. Unfortunately, some TV stations and some newspapers were unable to count beyond 200. So we had an audience of 200."

This extract demonstrates Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's adept use of **sarcasm** and **hyperbolic** humour, with a subtle undertone of **satirical** humour targeted at the media's reporting practices. Here is an in-depth analysis:

Sarcasm: This remark is laced with sarcasm, especially in the latter part, "*Unfortunately, some TV stations and some newspapers were unable to count beyond 200. So we had an audience of 200.*" The sarcasm here criticises the media's alleged underreporting of crowd sizes at political gatherings, implying a deliberate minimisation or misrepresentation of the support his movement received.

Hyperbolic Humor: Initially, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed employs hyperbole by contrasting the expected turnout ("*between 5000-8000 people*") with the actual turnout ("*at times, 40,000 people*"). This exaggeration emphasises the high support and enthusiasm generated after the announcement of the impending elections, heightening the comedic effect when juxtaposed with the media's reported figure of only 200 attendees.

Satirical Humor: The entire statement carries a satirical edge, offering critique under the guise of humour. By highlighting the discrepancy between the actual and reported audience sizes, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed satirises the credibility and objectivity of certain media outlets, suggesting they downplay the popularity of his gatherings. The satire extends to the political climate, indirectly referencing a controlled or biased media landscape that does not accurately reflect public sentiment.

Analysis:

Tun Dr Mahathir's statement cleverly combines these elements of humour to deliver a multifaceted critique. It mocks the alleged inability of some media outlets to accurately report crowd sizes, thereby questioning their journalistic integrity and impartiality. Meanwhile, using hyperbole to exaggerate the expected and actual turnout underscores the significant public interest and support for his political cause.

This nuanced application of humour highlights Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's skilful engagement with political narratives and media critiques. Using sarcasm and satire, he effectively points out the perceived biases in media reporting, engaging his audience with humour while drawing attention to serious issues regarding media coverage and political support. Moreover, such remarks bolster his image as a politically savvy leader who adeptly navigates and manipulates media narratives to his advantage, using humour for political commentary and mobilisation.

"If you have anything more, you may ask questions, in a very orderly fashion. Please remember that I was the dictator."

This extract, made after he concluded the first press conference, showcases Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed employing **self-deprecating** humour and a touch of **irony**. Here is how these elements come into play:

Self-Deprecating Humor: Self-deprecating humour involves making oneself the subject of the joke, demonstrating humility and approachability. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed jests about his past label as a "dictator," a term often used by critics to describe his strong leadership style during his first tenure as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister. By invoking this label, he acknowledges the criticism and diminishes its severity by humorously treating it. This humanises him to his audience, showing that he can joke about his contentious image.

Irony: The irony in his statement lies in the juxtaposition of inviting questions in "a very orderly fashion" with the reminder that he was labelled a "dictator." The implication is that, despite the negative connotation of being a dictator, he is open to dialogue and questions, albeit in an organised manner. This contrasts with the authoritarian image the term "dictator" suggests, highlighting an ironic twist where a leader known for stringent control mockingly reassures the press of his approachability.

Analysis:

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's remark illustrates his adeptness at utilising humour to navigate potentially sensitive subjects. By labelling himself as a "dictator" in jest, he preemptively engages with and diffuses any underlying tension related to his leadership style. This strategy showcases his wit and serves as a rhetorical tool to frame the question-and-answer session light-heartedly, potentially making it easier for him to manage the direction and tone of the subsequent interactions.

Such a blend of self-deprecation and irony exemplifies Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's sophisticated use of humour for communication and image management. It reflects an understanding that humour can be powerful in softening perceptions, disarming critics, and fostering a more relaxed and open exchange. Moreover, this approach underscores his skill in maintaining control over the narrative surrounding his political legacy, using humour to redefine and engage with the labels and criticisms directed at him.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of verbal humour in Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's public remarks illuminates the deliberate and multifaceted use of humour as a powerful tool in political communication and leadership. Through self-deprecating humour, sarcasm, hyperbolic humour, and irony, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed navigates the complex landscape of political discourse, employing humour not just for entertainment but as a strategic device to engage with the audience, critique societal and political norms, and manage his public image.

By poking fun at himself through self-deprecating humour, particularly regarding his portrayal as a "dictator," Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed demonstrates a keen ability to engage in humility and humour. This approach humanises him, offering relatability and disarming potential criticism, paramount for a leader with a long and nuanced political history.

His sarcastic remarks on the media's underreporting cleverly highlight discrepancies between reported and actual events, drawing attention to media bias and representation issues with a lighthearted veneer. This showcases his adeptness at critiquing societal structures while keeping the tone accessible and engaging. The exaggerated claims about attendance at his rallies underscore his political support and critique media portrayals of his popularity. This hyperbolic humour reveals his savvy in manipulating the narrative to highlight the contradiction between perceived and actual public opinion. Irony and satire permeate his statements, providing keen insights into political processes and media interactions. These forms of humour enable him to address

serious subjects indirectly, offering critiques of political adversaries and media practices while maintaining a veneer of light-heartedness.

In conclusion, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's strategic employment of humour in his speeches and public remarks reflects an intricate balance between engaging the audience and addressing critical issues within Malaysian politics and media. His humour transcends mere entertainment, serving as a vehicle for critique, diplomacy, and image management. It underscores the potential of humour in leadership, illustrating how it can be wielded to soften perceptions, foster dialogue, and navigate the complexities of political rhetoric. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that skillfully employed humour can enhance a leader's relatability, underscore their intellectual agility, and provide a nuanced tool for political and social engagement.

This study is significant as there has been a lack of research on Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed's humorous side. As a prominent political figure and two-time Prime Minister of Malaysia, most researchers have focused on his leadership style and vision in establishing Malaysia as a developed nation. For future research, it is recommended that more extracts from Tun Dr Mahathir bin Mohamed's speeches be analysed to understand more of his humorous style and as a communication strategy. It is also recommended that humour as a communicative strategy be included in the work of other prominent political leaders. A comparative study of leaders from different continents and backgrounds can reveal different styles of humour use.

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Conflict of Interest

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

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