Humor in Thai Political Cartoons Published During the 2013-14 Thai Political Crisis

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Thailand in 2013-14 is a period of political instability. The protest organized by PDRC is one of the world's largest and longest political protests (Prasirtsuk, 2015). The purpose of the movement was to expel Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government. Eighty-seven political cartoons published during the period were collected from four newspapers: *Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*, *Thai Rath*, and *Daily News*. This study aims to investigate 1) how political cartoonists create humor in their cartoons; 2) what kind of humor political cartoonists used in their cartoons; and 3) what are the differences between political cartoons published in Thai and English newspapers. The analysis reveals that most of the cartoons published are one-framed cartoons. Cartoonists create humor by using image and text whose meanings so closely related to the situation and context dependent that none of the elements can be understood in isolation. Some of the cartoons do not contain humor. On the other hand, most multi-framed cartoons contain dialogues between two characters that generate humor by using incongruity and ambiguity that cause surprise, as well as flouting maxims of Cooperative Principle. There are two main differences between political cartoons published in English and Thai newspapers: 1) most English cartoons are one-framed while Thai cartoons are multi-framed; and 2) English cartoons present simple images and readers need only a little background knowledge on Thai politics to understand them, while Thai cartoons present complex ideas that need a great deal of background knowledge to understand them.

Keywords: humor, Thailand, political cartoons, newspaper

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Introduction

Thailand is a country in Southeast Asia which has faced a number of political problems and protests for several decades which due to various complicated causes. Since the end of 2013, Thailand has embarked on a new phase of the political struggle between two competing forces that have destabilized the country. One force is widely known as the Yellow Shirt. It is a coalition of conservative, pro-establishment forces featuring old elite groups, military-bureaucrats, middle class Thais, and comparatively well-to-do people in the South. Many are royalists who identify themselves as people of the king. Another force is commonly known as the Red Shirt. It is represented by rural-based politicians led by the ousted tycoon-turned-politician and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Its solid constituency bases are grassroots, mostly in the North and Northeast (Prasirtsuk, 2015).

During the 2013-14 political crisis, there were protests against Prime Miniter Yingluck Shinawatra's government from November 2013 to May 2014. The anti-government protests were organized by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), a political pressure group set up and led by Suthep Thaugsuban, former Deputy Prime Minter and Secretary General of the Democrat Party (Tan, 2014). The protest was ended on May 22, 2014 by a coup that removed the government and placed General Prayuth Chan-ocha as acting prime minister.

News about the crisis was presented in every mass media, like television, radio, the internet, and newspaper; however, newspaper is still the one which is used by a great deal of people to seek for information. Wright (1960) refers newspaper as "a tool for daily living" because when people missed their daily papers they were, in fact, missing a tool for daily living. Besides serious political news column in newspaper, there is political cartoon column in almost every newspaper. Greenberg (2002) argues that political cartoons have a temporary character. This is due not to the notion that an assertion or inference will lack meaning for some people, but that they will be more persuasive with people living under a particular set of social, historical, political, economic, and cultural circumstances.

In Thailand, there are political cartoons in every top-selling newspaper, both published in Thai and English languages. In addition, it is known that some of these newspapers tend to draw cartoons which support their favorite politicians and political party or groups, and against the others. Thus their cartoons were totally different in terms of the political and public opinions expressed during the 2013-14 political crisis. However, the cartoons in this study were published in the two top-selling English newspapers of the country: *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, and the two top-selling Thai newspapers: *Thai Rath* and *Daily News*.

Literature Review

Political Cartoons

Johnson (1937) argues that today is the day of the picture. The public these days has neither time nor wish for the great editorials which formerly did so much to mold political history. Thus the cartoonist is no longer just a commentator on the passing show and has become an editorial writer who produces a leading article in the form of a picture.

The political cartoon comprises of a very specific genre, with its own history, distinctive styles, conventions, and communicative purposes (El Refaie, 2009). Normally, it is an illustration in a single frame, published in the comments section or on the editorial pages of a newspaper. A current political issue or event, a social trend, or a famous personality, are commonly addressed by cartoons in a way that takes a stand or presents a specific point of view. Political cartoons are not always humorous, but they certainly contain an element of irony or at least something incongruous or surprising.

DeSousa and Medhurst (1982) state that cartoons may be considered a significant medium for the information of public opinion on important social or political issues and cartoons provide subtle frameworks for examining the life and political processes of a country. Abraham (2009) explains that cartoons are used as a tool to transform complex and obscure social or political events or situations into quick and easily understandable descriptions that promote comprehension of the nature of social or political issues or events or situations. In doing so, cartoons present the public with clear visual descriptions of deliberately exaggerated portions of reality with an aim to reveal the meaning and essence of social or political events. Moreover, Jabbar (n.d.) believes that the political cartoon is a visual language comprising verbal and nonverbal signs that are full of meanings.

Semiotics

As cartoons are images drawn by cartoonists to convey meanings or ideas, it is necessary to consider them as signs. Means for studying signs is semiotics which is the study of signs. According to Saussure, a sign is anything that signifies, or has meaning(s) within a particular code and a given context. Thus content in all modern and contemporary media are certain data for semiotic analysis (Mazid, 2008).

According to Chandler (2013), in semiotics, denotation and connotation are the two terms used to describe the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Denotation refers to the definitional, literal, commonsense meaning of a sign which is a meaning that can probably be found in a dictionary. In contrast, connotation is defined as the sign relating to socio-cultural and personal associations, like the gender, class, age, nationality, or ethnicity of the person interpreting it.

Barthes uses the term 'connotation' in order to define what kind of ideology signs refer to. In addition, his theory of connotative meaning was basically influenced by the work of Saussure. However, much of Saussure's work is primarily concerned with language system (first-order system of sign in Barthes' terms) or denotative meaning, while Barthes' work mainly focuses on myth (second-order system of sign in Barthes' terms) or connotative meaning (Griffin, 2012).

Barthes (1972) explains the concept of myth that the sign is involved in a three-part relationship. There are three different terms in semiological system: the signifier, the signified, and the sign. A sign is the relationship between a signifier – a sound or mark – and a signified – a concept. The concept has two orders of signification. In the second order, the sign system of the first is inserted into the value system of the culture.

Theories of Cartoon

Hempelmann and Samson (2008) explain that cartoons are understood as a humor-carrying visual/visual-verbal picture, containing at least one incongruity that is playfully resolvable in order to understand their punch line. The style of cartoons is most often characterized by simple lines, exaggerated features, as well as sketch-like and simplified figures.

In addition, there is a functional approach of political cartoons proposed by DeSousa and Medhurst (1982). They identify four main functions of political cartoons as follows:

1. An entertainment function derives from the ability of cartoons to make people laugh at individuals or situations.
2. An aggression-reduction function derives from the nature of cartoons to provide a symbolic channel for the public to express its frustrations against government, social leaders, politicians, and so on.
3. An agenda-setting function provides readers with a sense of the most notable topics or issues in society.
4. A framing function is the product of its spatial limitation and therefore its need to present complex social issues in a single frame that captures the essence of an issue.

Furthermore, semiotics can be applied to understanding how images work. It is essential to see that communication through icons, indexes, and symbols involves several kinds of inference. Communication is an abstract process involving several kinds of inferences. C.S. Peirce identifies three main kinds of inference (Oller & Giardetti, 1999) as follow:

The first inference is abduction which is the most basic form of inference that any given icon resembles a particular logical object. Thus abduction is primarily based on resemblances, and they are always grounded in the inspection of sensory signs. They deal with the perceptual present tense, because they are based on singular ongoing experiences (Oller & Giardetti, 1999 p, 95).

The second inference is induction. Inductive inferences take the material form of one or more abductions and apply it to subsequent abductions. Thus they involve associating a number of abductions (Oller & Giardetti, 1999, p, 96). Since associations require indexes to make the connections, inductive inferences are considered indexical in nature.

The third inference is deductions which are based on fully abstracted meanings found in conventional symbols and in their associated conceptualizations. As long as the meaning or the definition of the symbol is understood correctly, inferences that are based strictly on that definition will have all the validity of the symbol to support it. Thus pictures that contain printed symbols or iconic forms of symbols may help identify their meaning and enable higher levels of analytical communication. This may account for the predominant use of visual symbols that act figuratively and metaphorically in cartoons.

Theories of Humor

Cartoons are considered as a picture which carries humor containing at least one incongruity that is playfully resolvable in order to understand their punch line (Hempelmann & Samson, 2008). Furthermore, cartoons are jokes told in a picture comprising one or only a few panels (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000). However, in the case of political cartoons, they are not always humorous, but they certainly contain an element of irony or at least something incongruous or surprising (El Refaie, 2009).

Ross (2005) states that, for humor, the context is essential for determining whether a person finds something is funny or not. Furthermore, the features of language that have the potential to make people laugh can be examined. The incongruity theory focuses on the element of surprise. It is believed that humor is created out of a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke. Thus much humor is composed of an ambiguity, or double meaning, which intentionally misleads the audience, followed by a punch line.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *incongruous* as 'strange because of not agreeing with what is usual or expected.' Ross (2005) argues that unintentional humor may be caused by some lapse in expression while deliberate humor is carefully planned, often to the exact wording and timing. Moreover, David Crystal comments in the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (1987) that 'variations in self-expression are most noticeable in those areas of language use where great care is being taken, such as literature and humor.'

In addition, Ross (2005) identifies elements of humor as follows:

- There is a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke.
- The conflict is caused by an ambiguity at some level of language.

- The punch line is surprising, as it is not the expected interpretation, but it resolves the conflict.

In addition, Rutter (1997) explains that incongruity is when jokes are examined by adopting the incongruity theory, in which two objects in the joke are presented through a single concept, or 'frame'. The concept becomes applied to both objects and the objects become similar. As the joke progresses, it becomes clear that this concept only applies to one of the two objects and thus the difference between the objects or their concepts becomes clear.

The Cooperative Principle and Humor Theory

Paul Grice (1975) suggested that for society to function communication has to be oriented toward cooperation. He believes that conversation, or any other interactive social behavior, is guided by what he calls the Cooperative Principle. He explains that the principle instructs a speaker to make his/her conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which he/she is engaged. Grice suggests that his principle comprises the following four maxims:

1) The Maxim of *Quantity*
   a) Give the right amount of information.
   b) Make it as informative as is required.
   c) Do not give more information than is required.

2) The Maxim of *Quality*
   a) Try to make it true.
   b) Do not say what you believe to be false.
   c) Do not say something for which you do not have enough evidence.

3) The Maxim of *Relation*
   Be relevant.

4) The Maxim of *Manner*
   a) Be clear.
   b) Avoid obscurity of expression.
   c) Avoid ambiguity.
   d) Be brief.
   e) Be orderly.

In order to create humor in conversation, one of the maxims needs to be flouted by one speaker. According to Grice (1975), there are several ways of flouting a maxim; however, the most important one is violation or flouting. Violation is a delicately covert breach of a maxim, where the speaker hides the breach from the hearer. It is obvious in the case of quality, where lies are not intended to be detected. Also, it could apply to quantity.

Research Objective and Research Questions

By grounding cartoons within theories of cartoons and theories of humor, as well as semiotics, this study attempts to examine humor in political cartoons published in Thai – *Thai Rath* and *Daily News* – and English – *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post*. The newspapers were chosen based on their representation of the mass media that constantly scrutinizes and interprets political situations, as well as the audiences they serve. *Thai Rath* is the oldest newspaper and the best-selling newspaper in Thailand, claiming a circulation in excess of 1 million copies daily. *Daily News* is the second best-selling newspaper which has a circulation in excess of 0.9 million copies daily. *Bangkok Post* is the oldest English-language daily newspaper in the country with a history of more than 60 years. *The Nation* is one of two English-language daily newspapers in Thailand, besides *Bangkok Post*.

Thus this study examined cartoons involving with politicians, events, and situations, in the newspapers published during the protests of the PDRC from November 1, 2013 to May 22, 2014 (the day that the Royal Thai Armed Forces, led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Commander of the Royal Thai Army, launched a coup d'état). This period was chosen to reflect the beginning and subsequent development of the protests. The data were analyzed, in order to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do political cartoonists create humor in their cartoons?
2. What kind of humor political cartoonists used in their cartoons?
3. What are the differences between political cartoons published in Thai and English newspapers?

Methodology

Steps in the Study

The study followed the following steps:

1. The data were collected from the four newspapers during the period of November 1, 2013 to May 22, 2014.
2. The collected data were divided into two main groups: cartoons published in Thai language and the ones published in English language.
3. The data in each category were analyzed by theories of cartoons: DeSousa and Medhurst's four functions of political cartoons and Peirce's three main kinds of inference; theories of humor: the concept of incongruity and Grice's Cooperative Principle; and Barthes' theory of sign, in order to answer the research questions.
4. The data in each category were counted for frequencies and percentages.
5. The frequencies and percentages within categories were tabulated and compared.
6. The findings were analyzed, in order to find the conclusion of the study.

Data

The total number of cartoons found in the four newspapers was 932; however, 149 were excluded because they were not related to the political crisis. Thus there are 783 cartoons remaining. The numbers of cartoons found in the newspapers are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Numbers of political cartoons found in the four newspapers

Newspaper (cartoonist)	Thai Rath		Daily News	Bangkok Post			The Nation
	Sia	Chai Ratchawat	Khuaid	Dinhin	Mor	Yoot	Stephane Peray
Numbers of cartoons	168	205		43	74	56	
	373		179	173			58
Total	783						

The data were divided into two main groups: cartoons published in Thai language and the ones published in English language. Since the number of the data is relatively large (783 cartoons), the cartoons from three periods – the first weeks, the middle week, and the last week of the political crisis – are chosen to analyze. The table below shows the numbers of data collected from the three periods.

Table 2: Numbers of data for analysis

Newspaper (Cartoonist)	First Week	Middle Week	Last Week	Total
1. Thai Rath (Sia)	6	5	6	17
2. Thai Rath (Chai Ratchawat)	7	7	7	21
3. Daily News (Khuaid)	6	6	6	18
4. Bangkok Post (Dinhin)	1	2	2	5
5. Bangkok Post (Mor)	2	3	3	8
6.Bangkok Post (Yoot)	3	2	2	7
7. The Nation (Stephane Peray)	4	3	1	8
TOTAL				**84**

Data Analysis

The following are some examples of analysis of cartoons published in Thai and English languages. The analysis started with the cartoons drawn by Sia and Chai Ratchawat (*Thai Rath*); Khuaid (*Daily News*); Stephane Peray (*The Nation*); and Dinhin, Mor and Yoot (*Bangkok Post*), respectively.

Figure 1: Cartoon drawn by Sia

In this image, Suthep is holding a flag with Thai cabalistic writing and a phrase, 'Good guy with privilege'. He says 'We're good guys. We have whistles.' Behind him, there is a grim reaper with the word '100 dead bodies'. In front of him, there are words which say 'lead a rally, overthrow the government, overthrow a case'. On the right side of the picture, there is a group of people who are probably relatives of the people who died during the protests against Abhisit's government. They are holding photographs of their deceased relatives and a poster with a message that can be translated into English, 'Do not forget the case of ordering the police to kill people'. At the right bottom of the picture, there are two mice who say, 'A bad guy wants to be a hero' and 'Karma will come'.

This cartoon suggests that Suthep, who has been viewed as a bad guy, pretends to do good during the protests, because he was accused of ordering the police to kill people rallied against the government while he was Deputy Prime Minister. In the cartoon, Suthep says, 'We're good guys. We have whistles.' means PDRC is a group of good people who have a whistle as a symbol for fighting with the bad government. He is also holding a flag which says 'Good guy with privilege' which probably means he is a good person who is assumingly supported by the military or the king's ministers. The cartoonist uses a grim reaper as a signifier of the signified, Suthep's order to kill people. The signification of this sign is Suthep's guilt of ordering the police to kill people in the past which goes after him everywhere even though he is trying to be a good guy by leading people to rally against the blanket amnesty.

Figure 2: Cartoon drawn by Chai Ratchawat

The dialogue can be translated as follows:

Police officer: Good new, Kam. Your grandson is going to be released from jail.
Old man: How come? He has to be in jail for many years, hasn't he?
Police officer: Now Thailand has democracy… If you want to be free from any
                charge, you can vote in the parliament. No court involves.

The image probably takes place in a countryside where the two people –a police officer and an old man – are talking in front of a house.

This cartoon suggests that politicians of Pheu Thai party have voted in the parliament to pass the blanket amnesty to free various politicians from charges, especially Thaksin who has fled abroad to avoid his punishment.

In terms of humor, when the police officer said 'Your grandson is going to be released from jail', it is breaking the maxim of quantity. The police officer gives fault information to the old man, because the old man's grandson is not really going to be released from jail but only some politicians and people who involve with political conflicts. What the police officer said is actually an irony.

Figure 3: Cartoon drawn by Khuaid

The dialogue can be translated as follows:

Blue-shirt man: Pheu Thai and Democrat are both retreating.
Pink-shirt man: Pheu Thai is pushing the blanket amnesty while Democrat is
                    calling a rally against it. How could they are retreating?
Blue-shirt man: Both parties are retreating towards an abyss.

The image probably takes place in an office where two employees – a pink-shirt man and a blue-shirt man – are talking to each other.

This cartoon suggests that the actions of both parties – Pheu Thai and Democrat – which against each other on the proposal of the blanket amnesty, are leading towards major conflict among people in the country.

In terms of humor, when the blue-shirt man said, 'Pheu Thai and Democrat are both retreating', it is breaking the maxim of quantity, because he gives too little information to the pink-shirt man to understand the true meaning. Later, he said the last part of the sentence so that the pink-shirt man is able to understand what he really thinks about the actions of both parties.

Figure 4: Cartoon drawn by Stephane Peray

In this image, a monitor lizard, a symbol of bad things for Thai people, is posing like the Statue of Liberty. He is holding the amnesty bill in one hand while another hand is holding a torch; however, there are feces in the torch. Moreover, the feces are surrounded by flies indicating that they are stinky. The flies in the image are used as an index for bad smelling because it is commonly known that flies like swarming around things with bad smelling. In addition, there is a red circle with a crossing line around the monitor lizard. It is generally used as a sign of prohibition.

This cartoon suggests that passing the amnesty bill seems to be a good act of the government in the name of freedom and democracy. However, the bill is hated and disgusted by the people and should not be passed.
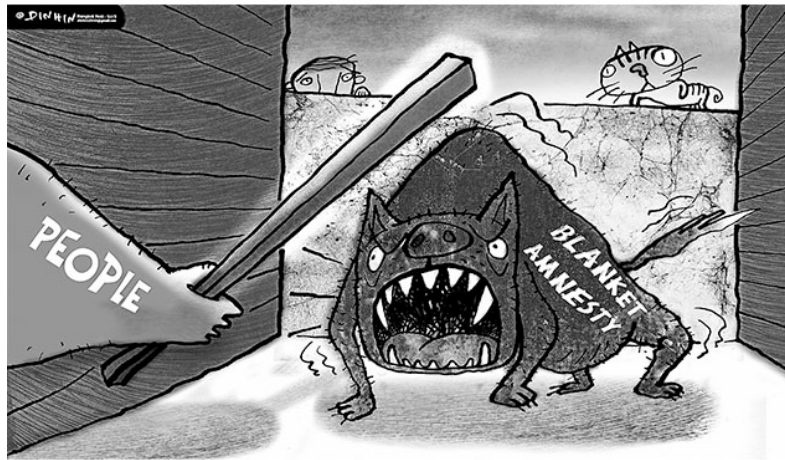
Figure 5: Cartoon drawn by Dinhin

This image takes place in a dead-end alley. It shows a desperate dog facing a man with a wood stick in his hand. Behind the dog, there is a cat on the wall and a man looking from behind the wall. This image derived from Thai proverb 'Sunak Chon Trok' which can be roughly translated into English "a cornered dog". The proverb means when you corner a dog into a dead-end alley, it would turn and bite.

In this cartoon, the cartoonist compares the dog in a dead-end alley with the amnesty bill proposed by Pheu Thai Party. The bill is opposed by many people, especially the anti-government groups and people who came out to rally with Suthep. In terms of semiotics, the barking dog is a signifier of the amnesty bill which is the signified in second-order system. The combination of the signifier and the signified is the signification of the amnesty bill which is being opposed by people. In addition, the big arm with a wood stick in the hand is a signifier of a signified or many people who strongly oppose the bill. Thus the signification of the hand with a stick is people who came together to rally against the bill.

Figure 6: Cartoon drawn by Mor

This image shows two men are painting an exit sign. The whistle-head man on the left is painting an exit sign indicating to the left; however, the foot-head man on the right is painting the same exit sign indicating to the right.

In this cartoon, the cartoonist compares the situation during the protest of the PDRC and the Red Shirt that they want different things, so that there is no solution for the crisis. The whistle-head man represents the PDRC because whistle is their symbol. On the other hand, the foot-head man represents the Red Shirt because they use a clapping-foot toy as their symbol during the protest.

In terms of semiotics, the exit sign indicating both ways is a signifier of Thai political crisis which is the signified in second-order system. Thus the signification of them is that there is no way out for the crisis. In addition, the two men is a signifier of a signified or the two groups of protesters. Thus the signification of them is two groups of people who are trying to find a way of out for the situation but what they are doing is completely different and opposite from each other.
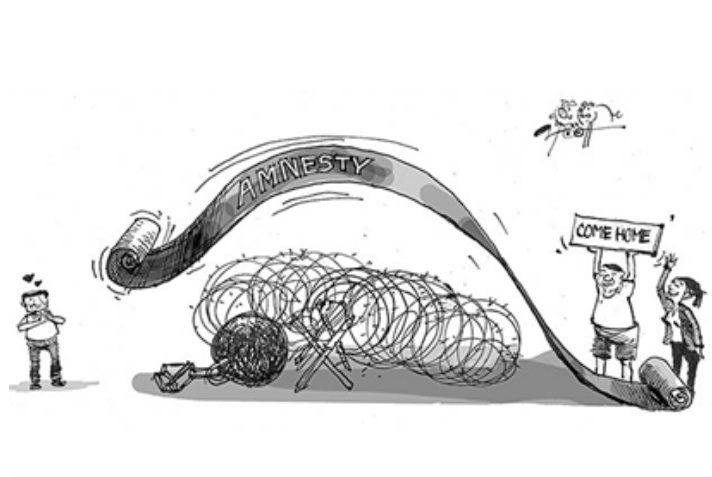
Figure 7: Cartoon drawn by Yoot

The man on the left represents Thaksin who is waiting happily for the woman on the right, Yingluck, to throw a carpet with the word, "amnesty", over the barbed wires. There is also a man holding a board with the words, "come home" besides Yingluck. He represents the Red Shirt members who support Pheu Thai party. In this cartoon, the cartoonist compares the amnesty bill as a way for bringing Thaksin back to Thailand, as it would also pardon him.

In terms of semiotics, the barbed wires is a signifier of charges or guilt of Thaksin which is the signified in second-order system. In addition, the carpet is a signifier of a signified or the amnesty bill. Thus the signification of the carpet and the barbed wires is that Thaksin would be able to come back home if the bill is passed.

Discussion

After the cartoons were analyzed, it was found that the cartoons drawn by the cartoonists were totally different in terms of the political and public opinions. The cartoonists tend to draw cartoons that support their favorite politicians, political party, or political groups. It is obvious that Sia and Chai Ratchawat are completely different in terms of their opinion, even though they are working for the same newspaper, *Thai Rath*. Sia always draws cartoons that attack or criticize actions of the PDRC, while Chai Ratchawat always draws cartoons that criticize the government or Pheu Thai party but his critics are more subtle and indirect like Sia's. For Khuaid from *Daily News*, his cartoons are quite neutral; however, he criticizes the PDRC a little more than the government or Pheu Thai party. For the three cartoonists from Bangkok Post – Dinhin, Mor, and Yoot – their cartoons seem to be the most neutral because they are not too aggressive and they criticize both sides of the conflicts as well as the overall situations. In the case of Staphane Peray from The Nation, he seems to be a little on the PDRC's side but his cartoons try to present the situations in the point of view of a foreigner who lives in Thailand.

Even though the cartoons of each newspaper and each cartoonist are completely different in terms of style, humor, and opinion, they help readers to understand the political events and situations more easily, in ways that cannot be found in political news column or any other columns of newspaper.

Conclusion

According to the result of the analysis, it was found that most of the cartoons are one-framed (48 out of 84 or 57.14%) that show both text and image; however, there are some of them that contain only image. The others are two or three-framed cartoons which show sequences of situations or dialogues.

Noticeably, the cartoonists create humor by using image and text whose meanings so closely related and interdependent that none of the elements can be understood in isolation. Since some images in the cartoons are purely symbolic, without text to indicate what they represent, the readers would not know the meaning of them.

However, some of the cartoons do not contain humor, especially one-framed cartoons since there is no incongruity found. Due to the fact that the cartoonists merely intend to criticize or present their opinion on politicians or political situations, and they probably want the cartoons to look serious, instead of making fun about the issues. On the other hand, most multi-framed cartoons contain humor because they are comprised of dialogues between two characters that generate humor by using incongruity and ambiguity that cause surprise, as well as flouting maxims of Cooperative Principle.

In addition, there are two main differences between political cartoons published in English and Thai newspapers. First, most of the English cartoons are one-framed while the Thai cartoons are multi-framed. Second, the English cartoons present simple images but readers need some background knowledge on Thai politics, Thai language, and Thai culture in order to understand them completely. In contrast, the Thai cartoons present complex ideas that need a great deal of background knowledge to understand them. Thus foreigners who do not know about Thai politics and Thai language well, they would not understand any of the cartoons published in Thai language.

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