

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Sri Lankan Political Cartoons

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Abstract

The illustrious body of Sri Lankan political cartoons has received inadequate attention. This qualitative study explored the rich corpus of Sri Lankan political cartoons to decode the messages, and to discover the assorted modes those political cartoons employ. The study was a discursive content analysis, using the multimodal discourse analysis, on 52 political cartoons featured in the English weekly, *Sunday Observer*, from January 2021 to December 2021. The research decrypted the convoluted messages communicated through the chosen cartoons. The foregrounding of the socio-political and economic messages aided by the contexts of socio-political and economic significance was recognised. The mirroring of the major incidents of social, political and economic significance to spread awareness among the common populace, and the feasibility and comprehensibility of the visual projections were highlighted in the conclusions.

Keywords: Context, Decoding messages, Modes, Multimodal discourse analysis, Sri Lankan political cartoons

Introduction

Political cartoons constitute an enthralling genre. The seemingly simplistic outlook of the political cartoons is a deceptive yet beguiling cover that sheaths a multitude of meanings and information embedded in those. The origin of these fascinatingly intricate political cartoons can be attributed to cartooning, which was “an outgrowth of caricature” (Johnson, 1937, p.21) used for “more or less distorted representation of issues, situations, and ideas” (Johnson, 1937, p.21). Dan Backer (as cited in McCallum, n.d.), defines political cartoons as a fusion of the two elements; “caricature” and “allusion” (para. 2).

The subtlety and striking visuals of political cartoons make them powerful weapons that can be used to communicate, criticise, influence, stimulate debates, and even provide a cathartic effect. Bush (2013) perceives political cartoons as “a complex system of symbols, pictures, and words put together in a way that newspaper readers, who understand the intended message of the cartoonist, will better understand the issue that the cartoonist addresses” (p.63). Bush’s (2013) statement denotes how political cartoons bridge the world of politics and that of the general public simply by spreading awareness regarding current occurrences.

The rhetoric of political cartoons, which was once contained to the printed media, has now reached digital platforms making itself ubiquitous. This “universal instrument of a political dialogue between government and society, [and] a reflection or reaction of society to a political event” (Dugalich, 2018, pg. 158) is also a record of history that can be used in the teaching-learning process. According to McCarthy (1977), “Political cartoons can also be used for any unit that is aimed at teaching the skills of analysing historical evidence” (p.32).

The rich multifaceted nature and the various functions served by the political cartoons invite further exploration. The present study seeks to contribute to this gallant purpose.

Aim and Objectives of the Research

This research aims to decode the messages delivered through the Sri Lankan political cartoons while

investigating the modes employed in those cartoons, utilising multimodal discourse analysis (hereinafter MDA).

The study includes two research objectives to facilitate the purpose of the research, which are as follows.

1. To investigate what socio-political and economic changes in Sri Lanka gave rise to the political cartoon manifestations in selection for this research.
2. To investigate which modes are employed to generate the messages delivered.

Literature Review

The review of the extant literature offers insights into the scope of the studies conducted with regard to the discourse of political cartoons. When reviewing the current literature, it is obvious that the majority of the studies have examined numerous aspects of political cartoons in reclusion. A vast majority of studies in the corpus have concentrated on linguistic and non-linguistic elements of political cartoons. Apropos to linguistic elements, the most extensively investigated areas are morphological, semantic, and pragmatic elements. (Sani et al., 2012; Dugalich, 2018; Kondowe et al., (2014); Kwon & Roh, 2018; González, 2019; Bamigboye & Omotunde, 2019; Nasirov, 2003; Nonyerem, 2015; Emezue, 2012; Ibrahim, 2014) Semiotics is intensively investigated in the domain of non-linguistics, regardless of region or data in selection. (Robingah, 2020; Hasanah & Hidayat, 2020; Safalia, 2014; Akande, 2002; Putri, 2018; Aryuni, 2012) Among the handful of research conducted on Sri Lankan political cartoons the majority fixate on semiotic analysis. (Fernando, 2013; Gajanayake, 2014)

Furthermore, the current body of literature has examined the various functions performed by political cartoons, which can be classified into three major categories: communicating, influencing public opinion, the formation of ideologies and creation of social and political identities. Political cartoons serve three functions in terms of communication. The most common of the three is to provide socio-political commentary. (Emezue, 2012; Putri, 2018; Ibrahim, 2014; Mateus, 2016) The purpose of informing the public (Safalia, 2014; Akande, 2002) and providing a cathartic effect (Fernando, 2013; Robingah, 2020) constitute the other two communicative functions. Since political cartoons are an effective tool for communication, they can be used to shape public opinion. Several studies inspect how political cartoons leverage this power to spread propaganda. (Connors, 2007; Shaikh et al., 2016; Kondowe et al., 2014; Edwards, 2007) Agenda setting, though seldom studied, is another aspect of the genre of political cartoons that can be studied in terms of its influential function. The third and final role of political cartoons, as ascertained by reviewed literature, is the construction of ideologies and the creation of social and political identities. Only a few researchers have examined this purpose, which is further subdivided into three sub-sections: ideological construction, social and political identity construction, and ideological breakthrough resulting from resistance. The available minority of studies on ideological construction includes that of Sajid & Khan (2020) and Kean (2008). Since the second sub-section also represents a less-travelled path, it offers ample opportunities for new research. Nevertheless, research depicting political cartoons concerning resistance and revolution that resulted in ideological shifts constitutes a sizable body of work. However, when the Sri Lankan context is considered, there is a need for research that addresses these aspects.

As the reviewed literature highlighted the dire need of research on Sri Lankan political cartoons, the author of the current study believes that conducting a research to understand the dynamic of the object of inspection as the initial step would benefit both the body of literature on Sri Lankan political cartoons and the researchers who intend to study those. As the next step, a solitary inspection of specific elements can be carried out, and the current research will provide significant insights to aid future research on Sri Lankan political cartoons. The few studies that have looked into Sri Lankan political cartoons have used semiotic

analysis as their analytical framework. (Fernando, 2013; Gajanayake, 2014) Also when examining the studies on the discourse of political cartoons around the world, it is clear that semiotic analysis is the most commonly used framework. However, a number of studies used different frameworks, such as semantic, pragmatic, multimodal, and critical discourse analysis. A thorough review of existing studies, on the other hand, demonstrated the significance of MDA for a comprehensive examination of political cartoons. As a result, the current study considers MDA to be the best framework for the study because it intends to delve into the most intricate details of the political cartoons in selection.

Furthermore, the majority of research on Sri Lankan political cartoons has focused on political and editorial cartoons published in Sinhala newspapers. Fernando (2013) is an exception, as it examines editorial cartoons published in selected Sinhala, Tamil, and English newspapers in Sri Lanka. Though Fernando (2013) included English newspapers in his study, both newspapers considered; *Daily Mirror* and *The Island*, are privately owned. Hence, the current study will examine political cartoons published in the *Sunday Observer*, a state-owned weekly published by the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL/Lake House). Also, it is considered to be the oldest newspaper in print to-date. Furthermore, with the exception of the studies conducted by Robingah (2020), Hasanah & Hidayat (2020), and Sajid & Khan (2020), the research reviewed, including that of Sri Lanka, deals with political and editorial cartoons that were published a good while ago. As a result, a thorough investigation into the most recent political cartoons is a timely requirement that will undoubtedly contribute to the current body of literature.

Key Findings

The analysis of the 52 Sri Lankan political cartoons led to many findings. They are organized under the two subtopics used in the Data Analysis for clarity of presentation. They are contexts and messages.

Contexts

As one of the study’s four research objectives is to examine the contexts that influenced the illustration of the chosen political cartoons, a significant analysis was carried out to determine the socio-political, economic, and other contexts that emerged in Sri Lanka from the beginning of January 2021 to the end of December 2021. With such extensive analysis, it was revealed that there were certain similarities among the contexts on which these political cartoons were based. Further investigations on this aspect revealed that the contexts could be categorized under three main divisions *viz* social, political and economic. However, several challenges were faced in placing some of the political cartoons in such clear-cut dichotomies as those cartoons depicted powerful projections of two or more of these contexts. The distribution of the data based on the three main contextual divisions are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Distribution of the Political Cartoons based on their Contexts.

No	Social contexts	Political contexts	Economic contexts
01	Data 1	Data 1	Data 1
02	Data 3	Data 2	Data 2
03	Data 5	Data 4	Data 16
04	Data 6	Data 6	Data 21
05	Data 13	Data 7	Data 27
06	Data 15	Data 8	Data 35
07	Data 16	Data 9	Data 37
08	Data 17	Data 10	Data 46

No	Social contexts	Political contexts	Economic contexts
09	Data 18	Data 11	
10	Data 19	Data 12	
11	Data 20	Data 13	
12	Data 29	Data 14	
13	Data 32	Data 15	
14	Data 33	Data 17	
15	Data 34	Data 19	
16	Data 35	Data 21	
17	Data 36	Data 22	
18	Data 37	Data 23	
19	Data 40	Data 24	
20	Data 41	Data 25	
21	Data 42	Data 26	
22	Data 46	Data 27	
23		Data 28	
24		Data 29	
25		Data 30	
26		Data 31	
27		Data 32	
28		Data 33	
29		Data 37	
30		Data 38	
31		Data 39	
32		Data 41	
33		Data 43	
34		Data 44	
35		Data 45	
36		Data 47	
37		Data 48	
38		Data 49	
39		Data 50	
40		Data 51	
41		Data 42	
Total	22 Political cartoons	41 Political cartoons	8 Political cartoons

As shown in Table 1.1, the majority of the political cartoons are based on events with political significance. A total of 22 political cartoons are based on socially significant incidents, while only 8 cartoons, the minority among the three main categories, fall under political cartoons with an economic inference background.

Social Context

The study discovered that the political cartoons which have a background with social significance depict

unique areas of social interest. Education, health and well-being, public safety, festivities, law and order, and freedom and independence are among them. The distribution of the political cartoons with contexts of social interest is displayed in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Distribution of the Political Cartoons with Contexts of Social Interest.

No	Education	Health and Wellbeing	Public Safety	Festivities	Law and order	Freedom and independence
01	Data 29	Data 1	Data 17	Data 13	Data 3	Data 5
02	Data 32	Data 13	Data 35	Data 15	Data 37	Data 6
03	Data 36	Data 18		Data 16		Data 20
04	Data 40	Data 19				
05	Data 42	Data 32				
06	Data 46	Data 33				
07		Data 34				
08		Data 35				
09		Data 41				
10		Data 37				

Certain political cartoons, as shown in Table 1.2, fall into two categories. However, the majority of the political cartoons listed above share one major socially significant feature. Because the cartoons were published during a time when a global pandemic was sweeping the country, a significant number of them deal with the subject of ‘health and wellbeing’. Furthermore, the next most popular topic, ‘education’, appears to have been adequately addressed, as the country’s education system was jeopardized by both the COVID 19 virus and, more importantly, by the teachers’ and principals’ protest. Other topics have received moderate interest, but they are also important in understanding Sri Lanka’s social circumstances at the time these political cartoons were published.

Political Context

Based on the analysis, it was discovered that the larger branch of political context can be further subdivided into further facets anchored on the multiple facets of politics addressed by the political cartoons in question. Domestic politics and international politics are the two major categories under which these cartoons are classified. Though domestic politics extends into several areas, international politics is limited to the incidents in relation to the United Nations Human Rights Council (hereinafter UNHRC). The distribution of political cartoons with a background of political events is shown in Table 1.3, which divides them into two categories: domestic and international politics.

Table 1.3

Distribution of the Political Cartoons under Domestic and International Politics.

No	Domestic politics	International politics
01	Data 1	Data 9
02	Data 2	Data 12
03	Data 4	Data 14
04	Data 6	Data 38
05	Data 7	Data 39

No	Domestic politics	International politics
06	Data 8	
07	Data 10	
08	Data 11	
09	Data 13	
10	Data 15	
11	Data 17	
12	Data 21	
13	Data 22	
14	Data 23	
15	Data 24	
16	Data 25	
17	Data 26	
18	Data 27	
19	Data 28	
20	Data 29	
21	Data 30	
22	Data 31	
23	Data 32	
24	Data 33	
25	Data 37	
26	Data 41	
27	Data 43	
28	Data 44	
29	Data 45	
30	Data 47	
31	Data 48	
32	Data 49	
33	Data 50	
34	Data 51	
35	Data 52	

A closer examination of domestic politics revealed the various aspects of politics addressed in the 36 political cartoons included in the category. As shown in Table 1.4, the majority of the political cartoons examined in the study depicted inter-party politics. The depiction of Samagi Jana Balawegaya (hereinafter SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (hereinafter JVP) as a coalition working toward a common goal was a major highlight in these cartoons. The political arena is riddled with power politics, which are aptly depicted in the selected political cartoons. Working on personal agendas to strengthen power and positions could also be seen in the majority of the cartoons of this genre. The cartoonist had put an equal effort to portray intra-party politics as well. This also is intrinsic to politics. Further, the cartoons which address separatist politics and ethnic based politics could also be seen among the data set that was analysed. These categories provide insight into issues that are rarely discussed.

Table 1.4

Distribution of the Political Cartoons under Domestic Politics.

No	Ethnic based politics	Inter-Party politics	Intra-Party politics	Separatist politics	Power politics
01	Data 6	Data 2	Data 11	Data 6	Data 1
02	Data 7	Data 10	Data 22	Data 7	Data 4
03		Data 13	Data 27		Data 8
04		Data 15	Data 31		Data 24
05		Data 17	Data 44		Data 25
06		Data 21	Data 47		Data 26
07		Data 23	Data 48		Data 28
08		Data 27	Data 50		Data 30
09		Data 28	Data 51		Data 33
10		Data 29	Data 52		Data 41
11		Data 32			
12		Data 37			
13		Data 43			
14		Data 45			
15		Data 47			
16		Data 49			

Economic Context

The findings foregrounded by the data analysis revealed that a few political cartoons were created on the premises of certain incidents of economic importance to the country. In observing these handful of cartoons, two major categories were identified. Those were the cartoons that projected the economic status of the country and the cartoons which illustrated economic benefits provided for the people. The distribution of the cartoons based on this division can be depicted by Table 1.5.

Table 1.5

Distribution of the Political Cartoons under Economic Context.

No	Economic status of the country	Economic benefits for the people
01	Data 2	Data 1
02	Data 21	Data 16
03	Data 27	Data 37
04	Data 35	

Delving into the country's economic outlook during the year of 2021 is of utmost importance as the country was not facing favourable circumstances. Especially, the COVID 19 pandemic was a hard blow on the country's economy which was already deteriorating owing to many reasons. Meanwhile, it is also equally important to observe how the people of the country were tended during such harsh and testing times. The financial aids given to the people who were affected in numerous ways from the pandemic was praiseworthy, given the poor economic status of the country.

Further, as pointed out in the study, the country's economic situation recovered slightly due to certain singled out instances such as foreign investments, and the return of the Finance Minister Basil

Rajapakse.

Messages

The current study aimed to decrypt the various messages conveyed by Sri Lankan political cartoons and to investigate the modes that facilitate the delivery of the messages. To produce a generalizable result, it is necessary to inspect the type of messages delivered by the selected cartoons. This section is dedicated to providing an understanding of the messages conveyed by Sri Lankan political cartoons as evinced by the data analysed in the study.

These political cartoons adopt a yin-yang approach in delivering messages. The cartoons are biased towards the country's government; therefore, all the depictions of the government's actions are benevolent. The actions of the other parties, on the other hand, are portrayed as malevolent, devious, and opportunistic. The SJB and the JVP are the two main parties targeted by these political cartoons. These two groups are portrayed as protestors and obstructers. Furthermore, intra-party politics and power struggles have been encoded in the messages of some political cartoons. Though few in number certain political cartoons also conveyed messages that shows the international intervention in domestic politics.

Based on the common ideas often encapsulated in the messages of the 52 Sri Lankan political cartoons that were scrutinized for the study, the distribution of the political cartoons can be displayed through the Table 1.6.

Table 1.6

Distribution of the Political Cartoons based on their Messages

No	Benevolence of the government	Oppositions attempt to sabotage the government's actions	SJB and JVP union	Attempt to draw attention	Securing law and order	Selfish motives	Parties of the Opposition in jeopardy	Attempt to reinstate power	International involvement in domestic affairs
01	Data 1	Data 2	Data 2	Data 1	Data 3	Data 4	Data 8	Data 24	Data 9
02	Data 5	Data 6	Data 10	Data 17	Data 11	Data 14	Data 22	Data 25	Data 12
03	Data 15	Data 7	Data 45	Data 18	Data 20	Data 32	Data 26	Data 28	Data 38
04	Data 16	Data 13	Data 21	Data 29		Data 33	Data 31	Data 30	
05	Data 19	Data 21		Data 34		Data 36	Data 44	Data 47	
06	Data 21	Data 23				Data 40	Data 47		
07	Data 27	Data 39				Data 41	Data 48		
08	Data 35	Data 43				Data 42	Data 49		
09	Data 37	Data 50				Data 51	Data 50		
10	Data 46	Data 52							

Conclusion

The current research is aimed at decoding the messages conveyed by Sri Lankan political cartoons while

investigating the modes used in those. Based on a qualitative discursive content analysis of the Sri Lankan political cartoons conducted using the multimodal discourse analysis (hereinafter MDA); it was revealed that ninefold messages were communicated by the data analysed. Benevolence of the government, Oppositions' attempt to sabotage the government's actions, SJB and JVP union, attempt to draw attention, securing law and order, selfish motives, parties of the Opposition in jeopardy, attempt to reinstate power, and international involvement in domestic affairs are the messages that were communicated through a total of 52 Sri Lankan political cartoons analysed in the study.

In response to the objective of investigating the various contexts that gave rise to the political cartoon manifestations in selection for this research, the study revealed that contexts were provided by events of social, political and economic significance that took place in the year 2021.

The results of the analysis revealed how the Sri Lankan political cartoons mirror the major incidents of the social, political and economic significance of the country. These manifestations mainly aim to spread awareness among the common populace while serving many other functions. The practicability, comprehensibility and lucidity of visual projections aid in achieving these functions.

This study was conducted after a thorough review of the extant literature to bridge an existing gap in the subject of political cartoons, especially in relation to the body of literature on Sri Lankan political cartoons. Sri Lankan studies on political cartoons were very few. Further, this handful of studies that have scrutinized Sri Lankan political cartoons have used semiotic analysis as their analytical framework. (Fernando, 2013; Gajanayake, 2014) Though not used in the works of Fernando (2013) and Gajanayake (2014), the literature available suggested the suitability of MDA to inspect political cartoons. Thus, the current study made the conscious decision of using MDA as its analytical framework. In addition, a gap in the sample was also discovered. The gap arose from the use of political and editorial cartoons that were published in Sinhala newspapers. Despite the fact that Fernando (2013) included editorial cartoons published in daily English newspapers in his research, both of the newspapers considered, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Island*, are privately owned. In order to fill this gap, the current study used political cartoons published in the state-owned weekly English newspaper, *Sunday Observer*.

Furthermore, with the exception of the studies conducted by Robingah (2020), Hasanah & Hidayat (2020), and Sajid & Khan (2020), the research reviewed, including that of Sri Lanka, deal with political and editorial cartoons that were published some time ago. As a result, a comprehensive investigation into the most recent political cartoons as provided by the present study is an urgent requirement that will unquestionably add to the existing body of literature.

Based on the current study and its findings few recommendations could be made. The current study has taken the liberty to explore English political cartoons published in a state-owned newspaper. Further studies on political cartoons published in other languages can be conducted and would be a worthy addition to the current pool of literature. Further, the analyses of the cartoons revealed the use of Sinhala idioms and metaphors in those. These areas can be explored extensively using Sri Lankan political cartoons. Additionally, it was observed that several cartoons used for the study have drawn from movie references. This is an area explored outside Sri Lanka. However, there is room for investigation of this area in Sri Lanka. In relation to these, pop culture references can also be investigated. Some of the images used in the political cartoons that were inspected included stereotypical representations. As the genre of political cartoons is seldom explored in Sri Lanka, there are ample opportunities for future researchers and research enthusiasts to dig deeper into the subject of political cartooning.

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