Zhiwei Zhao, Chengtuan Li*, Jing Han and Huhua Ouyang

"Kaigewanxiao" ('Just kidding'): the use of humor markers in Chinese media discourse

Abstract: This study aims to investigate the use of the humor marker (HM) *kaigewanxiao* (literally, 'just kidding') in Chinese media discourse from a metapragmatic perspective. Based on 200 instances from the Media Language Corpus and adopting a corpus-based, bottom-up analysis, we establish a position-function taxonomy. The HM occurs in three sequential positions: prospective position, mid-message position, and retrospective position. These positions correspond to six interactional functions: (1) a prefiguration of an upcoming non-serious stance; (2) an adjustment; (3) a retraction from an immediately prior non-serious stance; (4) a repair of failed humor; (5) a shift from a non-serious to a serious frame; and (6) setting up a new joke. Through the lens of rapport management, we argue that the use of the HM in media discourse demonstrates the speaker's metapragmatic awareness in managing rapport with both the co-participants and the overhearing audience.

Keywords: humor markers; Chinese media discourse; corpus-based analysis; metapragmatics; rapport management

1 Introduction

A prevalent assumption in pragmatics is that recipients constantly infer speakers' intentions (Leech 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1986). When such inferences risk exceeding recipients' cognitive reality, speakers may use specific devices to clarify

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*Corresponding author: Chengtuan Li, Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China, E-mail: lichengtuan@163.com

Zhiwei Zhao, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China; and South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Liangtian Middle Road, No. 181, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510545, China, E-mail: 787029875@qq.com

Jing Han, Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China, E-mail: 3064836752@qq.com

Huhua Ouyang, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China, E-mail: 198310517@oamail.gdufs.edu.cn

their intentions in the moment-by-moment flow of interaction. Humor markers (HMs) come to the forefront in this regard, which can be used to signal a speaker's humorous or non-serious intent, either explicitly (e.g., "just kidding") or in less overt ways (e.g., emoji in online communication) (Burgers and Van Mulken 2017). The explicit markers can be categorized as metapragmatic markers that indicate speakers' reflexive awareness or "the judgments of appropriateness on one's own and other people's communicative behavior" (Caffi 1994: 2461).

Previous studies on explicit HMs across languages have examined their features and functions using broad-coverage corpora (e.g., Haddington 2011; Skalicky et al. 2015). Skalicky et al. (2015), for instance, have examined the functions of the HM "just kidding" in American English based on corpora covering various genres. However, prior studies have not generalized the sequential positions and functions of similar HMs and little investigation has been dedicated to the use of the HMs in media discourse at a micro-level. Media talk is uniquely characterized by its institutional nature and its production for an overhearing audience (Heritage 1985), which necessitates careful utterance design. As such, media discourse offers a prime site for the systematic study of the occurrence of HMs adopted by speakers in the public sphere.

Based on Chinese media corpus, this study aims to build on Skalicky et al.'s (2015) taxonomy from a metapragmatic perspective as a way of examining further how the HM *kaigewanxiao* is used by speakers in Chinese media discourse. Specifically, this study deals with the following three questions:
(1)   What are the sequential positions of HMs in Chinese media discourse?
(2)   What are the functions of HMs in relevant sequential positions?
(3)   What rapport managing functions (if any) does the use of HMs serve?

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature, covering metapragmatics, metapragmatic markers, and humor markers (both general and Chinese). Section 3 then details the data and methodology. The analysis is presented in Section 4 and the findings are discussed in Section 5, with conclusions offered in Section 6.

2 Literature review

2.1 Metapragmatics and metapragmatic makers

The notion of *metapragmatics*, introduced by Silverstein (1976), has been defined in multiple ways (e.g., Bublitz and Hübler 2007; Caffi 2007). The definition by Caffi (2007) is an often-cited one, which characterizes metapragmatics as "the management

of discourse, based on common knowledge and reflexivity" (p. 83). Following this definition, the current study discusses metapragmatics as the management of language devices to achieve certain interactional goals, which demonstrates a speaker's reflexive awareness in interaction.

Caffi (1994) delineates three senses of metapragmatics. The first sense is concerned with the theoretical debate on pragmatics as a discipline; the second sense pertains to the reflections about pragmatic conditions; and the third sense focuses on a speaker's competence that is reflective of their judgments of appropriateness of their own and other people's communicative behaviors. Our study falls within the third sense of metapragmatics, which addresses a speaker's competence in the process of assessing and managing the appropriateness of their language use.

Specifically, studies concerning the third sense of metapragmatics have progressed in two general directions (Parvaresh and Tavangar 2010). The first direction involves holistic explorations of metapragmatic markers across different interactional contexts (e.g., Culpeper and Haugh 2014). The second direction focuses on the in-depth functional analysis of specific types of metapragmatic markers or structures in particular settings (e.g., Liu 2022; Ran 2015). Our study aligns with the second direction, aiming to examine the interactional functions of the humor marker *kaigewanxiao* in Chinese media discourse.

2.2 Humor markers

In humor research, it has already been shown that conversational humor plays an important role in relationship management (Attardo 1994). Along this vein, a number of studies have examined the interactional functions of specific HMs across diverse settings (Haddington 2011; Senft 2018; Skalicky et al. 2015). More specifically, based on a corpus of face-to-face and telephone conversations in Finnish, Haddington (2011) investigates a reduplicate linguistic item called the 'joke–joke' structure. The author shows that speakers use this structure as a metacomment: (1) to withdraw from an immediately prior stance; and (2) to "disclaim a stance made in the first turn after a recipient's repair initiation" (p. 158).

Examining five corpora covering a variety of settings, Skalicky et al. (2015) capture the functions of "just kidding" in American English as a resource for rapport management. They identify four major functions of the phrase: (1) "inoculation", the pre-emptive use to inoculate the speaker against problematic reactions, typically following statements that are potentially offensive and preceding utterances provided by any co-participants; (2) "repair of failed humor", occurring after an intervening turn, during which a speaker's attempt at humor has received an undesired reaction; (3) "bid to return to serious", which is a return to a serious frame

subsequent to a non-serious statement; and (4) "setting up a new joke", a function "subverting interlocutors' expectations and extending the previous joke" (p. 23). Moreover, Senft's (2018) research in the traditional Trobriand community shows that in their language Kilivila, if hearers signal that they may be offended by a certain speech act, speakers can recede from what they have said by labelling it as *sopa wala* ('just joke'), thereby regulating the reactive behavior of an addressee. These studies suggest that the interactional work accomplished by using humor markers "goes beyond simply repairing misunderstood or unappreciated humour" (Haugh 2016: 121).

2.3 Humor markers in Chinese

In Mandarin Chinese, a general formulaic pattern for HMs is the predicate-object construction "V + (classifier) + *wanxiao(hua)*", which does not require an explicit subject like "I" (Li and Yan 2010). The core morpheme, *wanxiao* ('joke'), is a noun, with the optional suffix *-hua* ('speech/talk'). The common verbs (*kai*, *shuo*, and *jiang*) all convey a meaning of 'speak' or 'say', while the optional classifiers *ge* or *ju* may be deployed. Notably, *ge* can serve a subjective diminutive role, minimizing the pragmatic force of the utterance (Ren 2013). In terms of sequential placement, these HMs typically occur immediately before or after – but rarely within – the marked humorous utterances (MHUs),[1] and are consistently followed by a clear prosodic pause in speech (Li and Yan 2010).

Previous studies on Chinese HMs like *kaigewanxiao* have primarily explored their general pragmatic and discourse functions using broad-coverage Chinese corpora encompassing diverse genres (e.g., Li 2012; Li and Yan 2010). The observed functions mainly include pre- or post-directing recipients' understanding of the marked discourse, avoiding misunderstanding, enhancing the acceptability of potentially inappropriate utterances, and foregrounding a speaker's humorous stance. However, their findings require refinement, as they do not systematically engage with the sequential positions and interactional functions of HMs, nor do they explain their role in relationship management within institutional settings. To address these gaps, this study examines the sequential positions, interactional functions and rapport managing function of the HM *kaigewanxiao* in Chinese media discourse.

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1 In the current study, the marked humorous utterances (MHUs) refer to the utterances that the HM comments on. They often contain elements that could be perceived as potentially offensive, risqué, or otherwise filled with the potential for misinterpretation if not recognized as humor (Skalicky et al. 2015).

3 Data and methodology

3.1 Data collection

Our data were collected from the Chinese media database, Media Language Corpus (MLC),[2] developed by the National Broadcast Media Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center of the Communication University of China.

With reference to Kádár and House (2020) where they discuss how pragmatically important terms can be studied in a bottom-up way in corpora, we first need to identify the HM that we intend to examine in this study. We selected the targeted HM for analysis based on frequency, a criterion verified by panels of native speakers of the languages under investigation (see to Culpeper 2010 for further information on the connection between conventionalization and frequency). Three native speakers of Mandarin Chinese were involved in the identification of HMs, specifically "to identify expressions with the closest meaning and pragmatic use" (Kádár and House 2020: 147). One can refer to a wide range of the possible expressions of HMs, such as: (1) *kai wanxiao*; (2) *kai ge wanxiao*; (3) *kai ju wanxiao(hua)*; (4) *shuo/jiang ju/ge wanxiao(hua)*; etc. To find the most frequently and widely used HM, we asked our three informants to list variations of HMs with varying styles and syntactic complexities. All our informants referred to *kai ge wanxiao* and *kai wanxiao*. A preliminary review of our corpus, however, indicated that *kai ge wanxiao* exhibits greater flexibility in its sequential positioning, and it was therefore chosen as the HM for analysis.

Then, following the sampling procedure of Kádár and House (2020), we collected an initial dataset of 200 examples featuring the identified HM through collecting 200 hits by randomly sampling batches of 10 examples in our corpus. Each instance was examined in its source context to ensure that it functioned as a metapragmatic HM. Invalid cases (e.g., propositional uses of *kaigewanxiao* as in Example 1) were excluded, and immediately replaced "with valid ones that occurred before the batches of 10 examples in the corpus" (p. 148).

(1)   愚人节, 年轻人好玩, **开个玩笑**情有可原。
        On April Fool's Day, it is excusable for playful young people to ***joke***.

3.2 Data analysis procedure

In line with our research questions, we carry out the data analysis relying on three levels:

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2 MLC encompasses 34,039 transcripts of Chinese television and radio programs.

1) Identifying the sequential positions of the HM. In order to grasp the sequential positions of the HM, we adopt the typology of positions of metapragmatic comments (Tanskanen 2007). Tanskanen (2007) has proposed three positions where metapragmatic comments occur: *prospective*, *mid-message*, and *retrospective.* Due to the high flexibility of the *retrospective* position, its two sub-types are discriminated based on Schegloff (2016), including *next-beat*[3] (within the beat following the prior possible completion of talk) and *post-other-talk* (after some talk by another speaker), so as to attend to a finer level of granularity. This step provides a basis for the investigation of the interactional functions of the HM.

2) Identifying the pragmatic functions of the HM at the relevant sequential positions, along with the expanded context. During this procedure, we take into account inferences accessible to recipients which are licensed by the sequential turn designs (Schegloff 2007) and make reference to recipients' responses (if any) to speakers' utterances involving the HM.

3) Using the concepts of Rapport Management (Spencer-Oatey 2000), we analyze why the MHUs put rapport at stake and how the use of the HM dynamically engages in rapport management, such as the management of face wants, sociality rights and interactional goals in the ongoing interactions. The use of HM addresses "quality face" when showing a speaker's concern for their own or others' qualities, such as competence, abilities and appearance, and "identity face" when demonstrating a speaker's awareness for their own or others' "social identities or roles, e.g., as group leader, valued customer, close friend" (Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540). Additionally, it deals with interactional goals when it involves the management of "the specific task and/or relational goals that people may have when they interact with each other" (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 14). During this qualitative process, we consider the basic information (e.g., identity, relationship, age, etc.) and the immediate responses (if any) of participants to ensure the HMs are not examined in isolation.

The data were annotated and coded by the four authors independently. On each level of coding, the authors were provided with sets of options, including the typology of positions of metapragmatic expressions, the taxonomy of functions proposed by Skalicky et al. (2015), and the notions from the framework of Rapport Management (Spencer-Oatey 2000). The individual coding results were discussed until agreement

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3 In Schegloff's (2016) sense, *next-beat* and *post-other-talk* are positions or locations, in which increments are deployed. "Increment" is a form of "continuation", "which involves extending the turn-constructional unit (TCU) that had been brought to possible completion (vs. constructing a new TCU)" (p. 239).

was reached. It should be mentioned that because our dataset consisted of text data, where interactional subtleties such as paralinguistic traits are rarely made apparent, we did not follow conversation analytic conventions during the analytical process but focused primarily on contextualization cues and language suggestive of humor or attempts at humor. Moreover, in order to be consistent and discuss each instance conveniently, we have formatted the extracts in the analysis section to include turn numbers, add emphasis (bold type and italics) to the HMs, and underline the MHUs.

4 Data analysis

Our general observation is that, in Chinese media discourse, the HM *kaigewanxiao* occurs in three sequential positions – retrospective (including next beat and post-other-talk), mid-message, and prospective – and serves six key functions. At the *prospective* position, the HM prefigures an upcoming non-serious stance (likely an attempt at humor); at the mid-message position, it performs online adjustment; at the *next-beat* position, it retracts from an immediately prior stance, or sets up a new joke; and at the *post-other-talk* position, it repairs failed humor. Additionally, when followed by serious statements, the HM at the *next-beat* or *post-other-talk* position marks a shift from a non-serious to a serious frame. Table 1 displays the frequency of the HM in terms of its sequential positions and corresponding functions.

As can be seen from Table 1, the HM is most frequently used at a retrospective position, followed by the prospective position, and the mid-message position, respectively. With a consideration of the sub-types of the retrospective position, next beat is the most common position of the HM occurrence, and post-other-talk is the second most frequent position. In terms of function, *retraction from an immediately prior stance* is the most common function of the HM in our data. *Shift from non-*

Table 1: Frequency of the HM in terms of its sequential positions and corresponding functions. Frequency includes overlapped instances because one instance may demonstrate dual functions.

Positions		Functions	Frequency	Total
Retrospective	Next-beat	Retraction	108	108(54 %)
		Shift	41	
		Setting up new jokes	7	
	Post-other-talk	Repair	48	48(24 %)
		Shift	45	
Mid-message		Adjustment	4	4(2 %)
Prospective		Prefiguration	40	40(20 %)

serious to serious is the second most frequent function of the HM. *Repair of a failed humor* is the third highest function of the HM, followed by *prefiguration of an upcoming stance* and then *the new joke set-up* function. *Adjustment* is the least frequent function of the HM. Next, we carry out a detailed analysis of selected examples.

4.1 Prefiguration of an upcoming stance

The HM *kaigewanxiao* at *prospective* position serves as a prefiguration of an upcoming stance. It is employed when the speaker presumes his/her upcoming utterances might cause negative emotions in the target recipient. By predefining such potentially problematic events in a humorous manner, the HM reduces their salience as an interactional cue (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). Instances with this function are coded from MLC when a speaker states *kaigewanxiao* prior to any potentially playful or non-serious statement that is "offensive or otherwise rife with the potential for misinterpretation" (Skalicky et al. 2015: 23). Consider example (2), in which the HM *kaigewanxiao* prefigures an upcoming statement that is potentially offensive.

(2)　　　(Context: Huang Nubo, a Chinese entrepreneur and explorer, dubs Icelanders Viking pirates when talking about Icelandic food in an interview.)
　　1　黄怒波: 你要它那个餐桌一上来的饭菜就是, 就说, 哦, 这是海狮的胸脯肉, 海象的鼻子这个是, 这是海豹肉, 这是鲸鱼肉。
　　2　陈鲁豫: 这能吃吗?
　　3　黄怒波: 他们全都打, 现在全世界捕鲸的大概就三个国家, 日本、挪威还有冰岛, 所以它这个, 过去, 我**开个玩笑**, <u>他们是维京海盗嘛</u>, 过去他们一直靠捕鱼为生。
　　1　Huang Nubo: The dishes served at the table are breast meat of sea lions, nose of walruses, seal meat and whale meat or something.
　　2　Luyu: Is it legitimate to eat them?
　　3　Huang Nubo: They all hunt them. Now there are only about three countries still hunting whales. They are Japan, Norway and Iceland. ***To tell a joke***, <u>they were Viking pirates in the past</u>, and thus they used to live by fishing.

In example (2), the guest Huang begins by describing the Iceland dishes, which are likely to be perceived as unusual and illegitimate by most Chinese people (01). Then, the host Luyu explicitly questions the legitimacy of consuming such food (02). In response, Huang justifies this practice by referencing the whaling traditions of

Iceland and other nations. Before offering the potentially offensive analogy that "they were Viking pirates",[4] he pre-emptively frames it with *kaigewanxiao* (03). This use of the HM at the *prospective* position serves as an overt signal for the audience to interpret the upcoming statement not as a factual accusation but as a joke, thereby prefiguring a non-serious stance.

As a public figure, Huang would be aware of the risks of calling Icelanders Viking pirates, especially in a public interview given its wide-reaching audience. Icelanders here are the targeted overhearers who are not present but are the target of Huang's MHU. Without the HM *kaigewanxiao* to prefigure his upcoming utterance as non-serious, his stance could threaten Icelanders' group identity face (Spencer-Oatey 2005) by associating them with piracy rather than a legitimate profession. Therefore, the HM at *prospective* position reflects his metapragmatic awareness of rapport management with the targeted overhearers.

4.2 Adjustment

In our corpus, when the HM is put at the mid-message position, it serves to realize the adjustment function (Levelt 1983), which indicates a speaker's awareness of the inappropriateness or risk of his/her ongoing utterance and his/her efforts to make adjustment midway through the utterance. Instances with this function are coded when the HM *kaigewanxiao* occurs midway through a non-serious statement. Consider example (3).

(3) (Context: In a TV news commentary program, the host Shui Junyi and the commentator, Yang Yu, are discussing a prediction made by the IMD World Competitiveness Center that by 2084, the competitiveness of some industrial countries like Japan will fall behind some emerging countries like China.)

　　1 杨禹: 我觉得他这个预测, 咱们开个玩笑, 很不负责任, 因为我们所有几乎30岁以上的人, 都活不到2084年了, 看不到这个结果。

　　2 水均益: 但是我们得要有这个信心。

　　1 Yang Yu: I think this prediction, ***to be kidding***, is very irresponsible. Because almost all of us over the age of 30 might not live till 2084 to see that happen.

　　2 Shui Junyi: But we must have confidence.

In example (3), as the commentator Yang launches a criticism (01), he suspends his turn after 'I think this prediction' to insert the HM *kaigewanxiao* before producing

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4 Vikings were pirates who attacked villages in north-western Europe from the 8th to the 11th centuries and they were not "civilized" in the local understanding of the word.

the evaluative punchline ('is very irresponsible'). Subsequently, he provides a justification for his criticism, that is, almost all people over the age of 30 might not live till 2084 to see the prediction realized. The host Shui Junyi's response (02), 'but we must have confidence', shows that he aligns with his comment, while orienting toward a positive communal outlook.

In this example, the deployment of the HM at the *mid-message* position is indicative of Yang's online monitoring of his own utterance. It serves as an overt signal to the host and the audience to interpret his ongoing criticism not as a direct attack, but as a non-serious remark, constituting a punctual adjustment upon perceiving the potential face-threat. Had *kaigewanxiao* not been employed, the comment could have more directly threatened the quality face of the IMD World Competitiveness Center – the targeted overhearers – by bluntly criticizing the irresponsibility of the prediction made by this authoritative international organization. Taken together, this use of the HM exemplifies a form of metapragmatic awareness of rapport management with the targeted overhearers.

4.3 Retraction from an immediately prior stance

The HM in this section occurs at the *next-beat* position, one subtype of the *retrospective* position, serving to retract from a speaker's immediately prior stance (Haddington 2011). In our data, when speakers anticipate that their prior stance might be seen as offensive or inappropriate, they often use HMs to retract from the prior stance by clarifying their non-serious intent. We code instances when a speaker deploys the HM immediately after a non-serious statement and also before any responses from the interlocutors (Skalicky et al. 2015). Example (4) is a telling case, in which the HM *kaigewanxiao* serves to retract from an immediately prior stance.

(4)   (Context: Chen Shaopeng [male], the senior vice president of Lenovo Group, is talking about their corporate culture with Gu Feng [male] and Wang Jiayi [female], the hosts in a traffic radio programme.)
1   陈少鹏: 我们公司互相称呼不管你职位多高多低都称呼名字的, 这是我们公司的文化。
2   顾峰: 叫陈总有点生分。
3   陈少鹏: 公司内部没有人这么叫。
4   王佳一: 都叫少鹏, 女同志都这么叫吗?
5   陈少鹏: 差不多。
6   顾峰: 王佳一你叫一个?
7   王佳一: <u>少鹏, 来杯咖啡吗?</u>***开个玩笑***。

1   Chen Shaopeng: Our colleagues call each other by first name regardless of the titles. This is part of our corporate culture.
2   Gu Feng: It sounds a little distant to call you *Chen Zong*.
3   Chen Shaopeng: Nobody calls me like that in the company.
4   Wang Jiayi: They all call you Shaopeng, even the female employees?
5   Chen Shaopeng: Almost.
6   Gu Feng: Wang Jiayi, do you want to have a try?
7   Wang Jiayi: <u>Shaopeng, a cup of coffee?</u> ***Just kidding***.

This example begins with Vice President Chen explaining that it is part of their corporate culture to be on first-name terms with each other instead of using a more formal title (01). Gu shows affiliation by saying that it sounds a little distant to call *Chen Zong* (02).[5] Chen affirms that nobody addresses him like that in the company (03), evoking Wang's curiosity about whether the female colleagues also use his first name (04). Following Chen's reassurance (05) and the host Gu's prompting (06), Wang addresses the vice president by his first name with a teasing offer of coffee (07). This tease, however, is immediately followed by *kaigewanxiao* at the *next-beat* position; this HM retracts the prior stance, frames it explicitly as non-serious, and thereby leaves no chance for a response from Chen.

If *kaigewanxiao* were not added by Wang after her tease (07), her utterance could threaten Chen's identity face (Spencer-Oatey 2000). Specifically, it could imply disrespect for his status, suggesting she feels entitled to use his first name and tease him without being a company insider. By deploying the HM to retract from her prior tease, Wang demonstrates concern for Chen's identity face as a vice president. Therefore, the use of *kaigewanxiao* reflects the speaker's awareness in maintaining rapport with Chen, who is both the addressee and the target of the tease.

4.4 Repair of a failed humor

In the previous two sections, the HMs are used in the same turn as the trouble source before getting any response from the co-participants. In this section, the HM is situated at *post-other-talk* position, another subtype of *retrospective* position. It is uttered after a speaker's attempt at humor fails or a co-participant shows misunderstanding of the speaker's non-serious utterance. In this way, the HM is employed at *post-other-talk* position to repair the failed humor (Skalicky et al. 2015) or set aside

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5 In Chinese, the combination of the family name (e.g. Chen) with *Zong* (abbreviated from titles like *zongcai*, 'president' or 'vice president') is a formal address used to show respect to high-ranking executives.

the co-participant's misunderstanding (Haddington 2011; Schegloff 1992). Example (5) is a case in point.

(5)　　(Context: The hosts, Jiajia and Shengbo, are discussing with a dentist, Fang Bisong, and a vice president of a company, Zhao Hongwei, the harm and treatment of food impaction in a radio program. Jiajia risks offense by making fun of Zhao's long pinky nail.)

1　赵宏伟: 这个话题我特感兴趣, 我就属于喝口凉水都塞牙的那一种。
2　盛博: 您是超级"塞牙人"是吗?
3　赵宏伟: 基本上是。
4　嘉佳: <u>你看他的小手指。</u>
5　赵宏伟: 拜托,你不能口味这么重吧!
6　盛博: 你口味太重了李嘉佳, 我就在想象赵总用小手指那么长的指甲抠牙齿的画面。
7　方碧松: 眼睛很敏锐。
8　赵宏伟: 对, 以后你们的节目会被投诉破坏嘉宾形象。
9　嘉佳: 不是, 不是, ***开个玩笑***, 因为正好看到了小手指, 真的赵总绝对没这个习惯。

1　Zhao Hongwei: I'm very interested in this topic. Even water gets stuck in my teeth.
2　Shengbo: You are a Super Saiyan, right?
3　Zhao Hongwei: Basically, yes.
4　Jiajia: <u>Look at his pinky.</u>
5　Zhao Hongwei: God, please. You are not such a weirdo.
6　Shengbo: Your taste is too weird, Jiajia. I'm just imagining Mr. Zhao picking his teeth with his long pinky nail.
7　Fang Bisong: A keen eye.
8　Zhao Hongwei: Yes, but your show will be complained about for undermining the image of the guests.
9　Jiajia: No, no, ***just kidding***, because I just happened to see the little finger. Mr. Zhao really has no such habit.

In line 01, the guest Zhao exaggerates his symptom of food impaction, implying that it is very easy for food to get trapped between his teeth. The host Shengbo further highlights Zhao's symptom of food impaction by dubbing him Super 'Saiyan' (02), which evokes Zhao's affiliative response (03). 'Saiyan' here is an appellation from a Japanese anime that shares a similar pronunciation with the word *saiya* ('food impaction') in Chinese. The host Jiajia then shifts the focus to Zhao's long pinky nail (04). This remark is treated as a breach of taste and propriety by both Zhao and Shengbo (05, 06), and is facetiously amplified by Shengbo's vivid imagery (06) and Fang's mock praise (07). Zhao then declares that their program will be complained

about for undermining the image of the guests (08). Faced with these disaffiliative responses, Jiajia produces the HM *kaigewanxiao*, prefaced by two negations *bushi* ('no'), to repair her prior utterance by recontextualizing it as non-serious, and subsequently shifts to a serious frame to account for her prior statement (09).

Jiajia's use of *kaigewanxiao* thus serves a dual function: repairing the failed humor and shifting from a non-serious to a serious frame (see Section 4.4.2). If she did not clarify her non-serious intent through the HM *kaigewanxiao* and not turn to the account in a serious frame subsequently, her initial tease (04) risked casting Zhao as slovenly, severely damaging his identity face in front of the audience. Taken together, the use of the HM *kaigewanxiao* at *post-other-talk* position demonstrates the speaker's metapragmatic awareness to save or remedy the rapport with the interlocutor Zhao by publicly repairing a failed humor.

4.5 Shift from non-serious to serious

In our corpus, the use of *kaigewanxiao* at the *next-beat* or *post-other-talk* position, when followed by statements in a serious frame, serves dual functions: it not only retracts an immediately prior stance or does repair work but also marks a shift from a non-serious to a serious frame (Schegloff 2001). This shift steers the discourse back to a serious footing, a function also observed in the English HM *just kidding* (Skalicky et al. 2015). We code instances with this function when an interlocutor states *kaigewanxiao* to retract from an immediately prior stance or repair a failed humor and then shifts to a serious frame. As illustrated in example (6), the HM at *next-beat* position serves as both a retraction from an immediately prior stance and a shift from a non-serious to a serious frame.

(6)　(Context: The participants are discussing the issue of the Chinese people's preference for buying cheap luxury goods in America in a news commentary program. Bai Yansong, a news anchor, makes a satire of this issue.)

　1　主持人: 我们一直在说要拉动内需, 但是我们通过刚才的数字看到, 在法国一个国家, 就花费15个亿, 为什么这么多的消费的需求都放在国外了?

　2　白岩松: ((省略)), 还有一个数字, 奢侈品在中国现在要交很多的税, 加了半天之后要33%, 这就导致中国人购买奢侈品60%以上是在国外买, 因为嫌国内太贵了嘛, 到国外一看真便宜。人家说在美国就流行三句中国话, 第一句话是真便宜, 第二句话是我都要了, 第三句话是还有吗?<u>就这三句中国话说美国人都能听懂, *开个玩笑*</u>。因此现在有人建议, 国内对于奢侈品所谓征税可不可以降下来, 这样的话, 把它变成内需的一部分。

1 Host: We have been emphasizing the importance to boost domestic demand, but the statistics we saw just now show that our luxury consumption has reached 1.5 billion yuan just in France. Why does so much consumer demand go abroad?

2 Bai Yansong: ((omitted)) Chinese people have to pay 33% of taxes to buy luxury goods at home, which is quite a lot of money. As a result, more than 60% of Chinese buy luxury goods abroad, because they are discouraged by the domestic price and fascinated by the cheapness abroad. It is said that three Chinese sentences are popular in America, that is, "zhenpianyi (what a bargain!)", "wodouyaole (I want to buy them all!)" and "haiyouma (Do you have more?)". <u>All Americans can understand these utterances.</u> ***Just kidding***. Therefore, it is now suggested that the domestic tax on luxury goods be reduced to make it a part of domestic demand.

At the beginning of example (6), the host asks Bai for his overall opinion on the reason for the outflow of the consumption of luxury goods (01). In response (02), Bai first criticizes some people for getting extravagant goods before getting rich (which is omitted). Then he turns to ascribe the reason of consumption outflow to the high domestic taxes on luxury goods. To indirectly satirize this phenomenon, he uses hyperbole: there are so many Chinese buying luxury goods in America that all Americans could understand the three Chinese sentences which demonstrate Chinese people's preference for buying cheap luxury goods in America. However, he immediately deploys the HM *kaigewanxiao* to clarify that he is being non-serious.

The deployment of the HM at the *next-beat* position here serves a dual function. First, it retracts the prior sarcastic stance. If *kaigewanxiao* were not used, the utterance might be seen as an attack on the overhearing audience who purchase luxury goods abroad and thus threaten their quality face (i.e., being economical and patriotic) and their equity rights (i.e., to be autonomous). Second, the HM shifts the discourse back to a serious frame, where Bai offers a policy suggestion on reducing the domestic tax on luxury goods. In this way, Bai attends to the interactional goal of their program (e.g., to make an impersonal comment on the issue of Chinese consumption), which is a key component of rapport management. Thus, by using the HM to shift from a non-serious to a serious frame in the same turn, Bai ensures that the rapport with the overhearing audience is preserved.

4.6 Setting up a new joke

In the previous section, we have demonstrated how the HM at the *next-beat* position serves to shift from a non-serious to a serious frame. In this section, we show how the

HM at the same position functions to subvert recipients' expectations and extend the previous joke or to set up a new joke. Example (7) is a telling case.

(7)　　　(Context: In an interview, the host is asking Guo Degang and Yu Qian, a popular duo of crosstalk, about their business.)
1　鲁豫: 你们俩现在都是大老板吧?
2　郭德纲: <u>你看出来了。</u> ***开玩笑***, 是小老板, 于谦是大老板, 很有钱, 以后借钱的事儿跟他说。
1　Luyu: Both of you are big bosses now, right?
2　Guo Degang: <u>You've realized it.</u> ***Just kidding***. I'm a small boss, but Yu Qian is a big boss with a lot of money. You can find him if you need to borrow some money.

This example begins with the host asking if Guo and Yu are both 'big bosses' (01). Guo initially seems to confirm this as he says, 'You've realized it' (02). However, he follows his utterance with the HM *kaiwanxiao*, ostensibly to avoid sounding arrogant. Here, Guo's use of the HM at the *next-beat* position aligns with the function to retract from an immediately prior stance; it becomes unnecessary for the recipients to take his words seriously after knowing he is 'just kidding'. However, Guo then subverts this expectation by launching a new, enhanced tease – contrasting himself as a 'small boss' with the 'big boss' Yu Qian, from whom others can borrow money.

As already suggested, a recipient may expect the HM to signal a retraction of a risky joke. Instead, the usage in this excerpt flouts the standard retraction function; "it tricks the hearer into expecting a downgrade but works to enhance the original quality of the humor" (Skalicky et al. 2015). Through the lens of rapport management, it can be assumed that Guo's recipients initially interpret his application of the HM as driven by his face sensitivity (in this case, to avoid being labeled as arrogant by the co-participants and the audience). Yet, Guo uses the HM *kaiwanxiao* to set up a new joke and to playfully manage rapport with the co-participants and the audience by deploying unexpected humor.

5 Discussion

Building on Skalicky et al.'s (2015) work, the current study reveals the use of the HM *kaigewanxiao* in Chinese media discourse from a metapragmatic perspective. First, it identifies the sequential positions where the HM is commonly used: *prospective, mid-message*, and *retrospective* (including *next-beat* and *post-other-talk*). Second, it delineates the interactional functions of the HM at different positions: at the *prospective* position, the HM prefigures an upcoming stance as non-serious; at the *mid-message* position, it performs online adjustment; at the *next-beat* position, it retracts an

immediately prior stance to inoculate the speaker against any problematic reaction, or sets up a new joke to purposefully flout conversational expectations; and at the *post-other-talk* position, the HM repairs failed humor. Furthermore, when followed by statements in a serious frame, the HM at the *next-beat* or *post-other-talk* position simultaneously marks a shift from a non-serious to a serious frame. Of these functions, prefiguration and adjustment constitute two significant additions to Skalicky et al.'s (2015) taxonomy. Third, through the lens of rapport management, we show that these functions of the HM collectively demonstrate the speaker's metapragmatic awareness in managing rapport with their co-participants and the overhearing audience.

The four functions of the HM – prefiguration, adjustment, retraction, and repair – best demonstrate the speaker's metapragmatic awareness of rapport maintenance across the temporal span of an utterance. Among these functions, prefiguration constitutes the earliest pre-emptive strategy of the speaker to manage rapport, minimizing interpersonal risk before a potentially problematic statement is even made (Example 2). Adjustment, in contrast, reflects real-time online monitoring (Chen and Jin 2022), allowing the speaker to recalibrate an utterance mid-flow to manage the hearer's reaction. It is indicative of the speaker's metapragmatic awareness of rapport management in his ongoing utterance (Example 3). Retraction operates post-utterance but pre-response, allowing a speaker to withdraw an immediately prior stance before it is challenged and threatens rapport (Example 4). Finally, repair serves as a last line of defense, working to restore rapport after a humorous attempt has already been met with a problematic interpretation (Example 5).

The shift from a non-serious to a serious frame operates differently, as it is oriented toward the management of interactional goals or wants of interlocutors. Speakers appear to treat their own humorous or non-serious statement as extraneous to the core topic of the talk, using the HM to explicitly mark a return to the serious business of the talk (e.g., Example 6). Conversely, the new joke set-up function seems, on the surface, to challenge or neglect rapport by violating the shared behavioral expectations of using the HM as a retraction tool. However, it may ultimately enhance rapport among interlocutors when the sense of humor is enhanced by the subversion of behavioral expectation (Example 7).

The case studies illustrate how the use of the HM is shaped by the complex participation framework of media discourse, engaging with both the co-participants and the overhearing audience. Specifically, the HM consistently demonstrates a reflexive awareness of relational dynamics, whether mitigating face-threats to absent others or the targeted overhearers (Ex. 2), managing the addressee's identity face (Ex. 4), repairing the rapport with the interlocutor (Ex. 5), preserving the rapport with the overhearing audience (Ex. 6), or building playful solidarity with both the

co-participants and audience (Ex. 7). Notably, the metapragmatic awareness evident in these examples aligns with the Confucian virtue of *li*, or politeness rituals (Xu 2011). This suggests that the use of *kaiewanxiao* is not merely an individual pragmatic choice but part of a broader Chinese cultural discourse for managing relationships – one that prioritizes the preservation of social harmony through respect for others and adherence to contextually appropriate behavior.

6 Conclusions

This study has examined how the HM *kaigewanxiao* is employed by speakers in Chinese media discourse. It thereby contributes to the study of metapragmatic markers (Caffi 1994) through systematically revealing the sequential positions, interactional functions, and rapport management role of the Chinese humor marker. Furthermore, it complements and extends Skalicky et al.'s (2015) taxonomy by adding new sequential and functional dimensions. Finally, the findings shed light on the micro-level strategies of metapragmatic management of rapport in media discourse.

However, this study has certain limitations. The temporal scope of the corpus is confined to a specific six-year period, and its focus on television and radio transcripts may limit the generalizability of our findings to contemporary, digital forms of media language. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides a taxonomy that showcases some commonly observed conditions of use of the Chinese HM, offering a benchmark for future research on HMs or similar metapragmatic phenomena to refine and expand upon. A promising direction for such research would be to examine the sociopragmatic constraints on this Chinese HM, which would benefit studies devoted to cross-cultural pragmatics (House and Kádár 2021).

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Bionotes

Zhiwei Zhao
Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China
South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Liangtian Middle Road, No. 181, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510545, China
787029875@qq.com

Zhiwei Zhao is a PhD student at the Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and a lecturer at South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. His research fields include pragmatics and membership categorization analysis. His work has appeared in *Lingua*, *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Pragmatics*.

Chengtuan Li
Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China
lichengtuan@163.com

Chengtuan Li is a professor in linguistics at the Faculty of English Language and Culture and a researcher at the Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. His research interests are discourse analysis and pragmatics, with specific reference to identity construction, emotions, im/politeness and rapport in institutional discourses. His work has appeared in *Text & Talk*, *Journal of Pragmatics, Pragmatics and Society, Discourse Studies, Intercultural Pragmatics*, and in key Chinese journals. His monograph on professional identity construction was published by Springer (2021).

Jing Han
Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China
3064836752@qq.com

Jing Han is a PhD student at the Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Her research fields include discourse analysis and pragmatics. She is particularly interested in interpersonal pragmatics, metapragmatics and health communication. Her work has appeared in *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics*, *Lingua*, *Discourse Studies*.

Huhua Ouyang
Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue (N), Guangzhou, Guangdong 510420, China
198310517@oamail.gdufs.edu.cn

Huhua Ouyang is a professor in linguistics at the Faculty of English Language and Culture and a researcher at the Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. His research interests evolve around anthropological studies of various practices of community.