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Presidential Language in the Pressroom
A Corpus-Assisted Analysis of Trump's Spontaneous Discourse

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0. Introduction

The present paper aims to analyse President Trump's use of spontaneous language by focusing on the most relevant features of his impromptu communication. For this purpose, we have chosen his press conferences as our subject matter, as they appear to provide meaningful information about the President's spontaneous language and his communication strategy. Our observations are based on a large collection of press conference transcripts relative to the time frame from his election (November 8, 2016) to his impeachment acquittal (February 5, 2020). These are available on the Internet (most of them were taken from the White House official website) and constitute the collection of texts (corpus) upon which this analysis lies, to which we shall refer as the *Trump Press Conference Corpus (TPCC)*. This corpus contains 211,237 total words (tokens) and 6,416 word types, that is, the distinct terms that have been uttered, without counting repetitions. To 'read' the corpus and extract useful information, we will use the software *AntConc* and its various functions. This is an invaluable resource because it allows us to analyse Trump's discourse both quantitatively – by showing how many times a word or phrase occurs – and qualitatively, as it permits us to see how these are used in specific instances. On occasion, it will be necessary to compare this data with data coming from a corpus of contemporary US spontaneous discourse which has been compiled using the same methodology and contains a very similar number of tokens, but is centred on the language used by other speakers. It includes transcripts of press conferences, interviews and debates by key political figures such as Mike Pence, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and many others. This will be employed as a reference corpus, allowing us to carry out a contrastive analysis and identify elements that are specific to Trump's use of language.

Special attention will be devoted to those elements that are representative of Trump's rhetoric and idiolect, as they can explain why the President's language is often considered to differ from the type of language used by other people in positions of power. One of our goals is indeed to shed light on the link between Trump's image and his use of language. His unexpected success in the 2016 presidential election as well as the ability he has shown in captivating his voters induce us to consider that his persuasiveness may stem not only from *what* he says, but also from *how* he says it. To study this, we shall refer to the three 'modes of persuasion' identified in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. These include *logos*, or the appeal to reason; *pathos*, or the appeal to emotions; and *ethos*, or the projection of the

persuader's credibility. These shape the structure of the present paper, which shall accordingly be divided in three sections. However, it must be reminded that *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* are not separate entities, but often appear as being intertwined, and the distinction we are making 'should be seen not as a linear *sequence*, but as a simultaneous *process*' (Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005: 81). Each section of this paper will therefore focus on one of these, yet without excluding the others, as their combination remains essential in the persuasive process.

0.1 The press conference: a hybrid genre

As mentioned, the present paper primarily focuses on presidential press conferences. Unlike set speeches, these provide a considerable amount of material on spontaneous discourse as they see the President answering questions on his feet. In reality, though, they consist of two distinct parts: a preliminary stage when the President visibly follows a script (despite at times making spontaneous digressions), and a subsequent non-scripted process of questions and answers, which is the most substantial and relevant part of such events. Because of their structural differences, the two parts also differ in terms of language. Consider, for example, how Trump's use of vocabulary, syntax and figurative language changes in the following sentences, extracted respectively from a scripted and a non-scripted utterance within the very same press conference:

> (a) Constructive dialogue between the United States and Russia affords the opportunity to open new pathways toward peace and stability in our world. I would rather take a political risk in pursuit of peace than to risk peace in pursuit of politics. As President, I will always put what is best for America and what is best for the American people.

> (b) One little thing I might add to that is the helping of people — helping of people. Because you have such horrible, if you see — and I've seen reports and I've seen pictures, I've seen just about everything. And if we can do something to help the people of Syria get back into some form of shelter and — on a humanitarian basis.

The hybrid nature of press conferences thus shows two different communicative approaches. For the purpose of this study, we shall concentrate on spontaneous language, that we deem more representative of the President's speaking style. However, the studied corpus being composed of full press conference transcripts, quantitative observations will also take scripted discourse into consideration.

The hybridity of press conferences also depends on the various audiences they involve. For a more compelling use of language, persuaders always need to know what sort of audience they are addressing. In this case, however, this includes not only the press, but also worldwide television and streaming viewers. Moreover, the corpus on which this study is based is mainly composed of joint press conferences, where President Trump makes a public appearance together with other political leaders and under their scrutiny. It will therefore be interesting to analyse in what way the President uses language to face such a wide and diverse audience.

It is finally worth remembering why press conferences are regarded as important events as well as interesting settings from a linguistic point of view. For US Presidents, they are functional to successful communication in that they show the President's ability to deal with journalists' questions, the capacity to field questions being 'a core skill for public figures in the television age' (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 2). Furthermore, press conferences 'have come to be regarded as part of the foundation of democratic government', but it must be observed that:

> [P]residents have also come to see that they can build popular support for themselves and their policies by performing well on such challenging forums. The press conference provides opportunities for winning friends and allies among pundits as well as publics.

> (Kumar, 2007: 255)

Apparently, President Trump shares this conviction, which is demonstrated by the *Trump Press Conference Corpus* itself. On February 16, 2017, he held a press conference where he said (addressing the media):

> But they'll take this news conference — don't forget that's the way I won. Remember, I used to give you a news conference every time I made a speech, which was like every day. […] No, that's how I won. I won with news conferences and probably speeches. I certainly didn't win by people listening to you people, that's for sure.

In light of all this, the study of Trump's press conferences appears all the more appropriate.

1. Logos

Of the three rhetorical categories mentioned by Aristostle, *logos* is the one that pertains to logic and rationality. It depends on 'the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself' (Aristotle, 2000: 4). Consequently, *logos* comes into play whenever the speaker / writer seeks to persuade their audience by appealing to reason. It is usually possible to identify specific passages, both in a scripted speech and in spontaneous discourse, where a rational argument is being exploited with the aim of demonstrating something. Such passages will be the focus of this section, which offers an insight into President Trump's discourse in press conferences from the point of view of *logos*. Consistently with the corpus-assisted approach of this paper, observations will be based on and supported by data from our *Trump Press Conference Corpus* (*TPCC*).

1.1 Frequent words and patterns: the people argument

The "word list" function in AntConc provides a complete list of the words contained in the corpus by number of occurrences. Identifying relevant terms requires in this case excluding functional words (high-frequency words whose function is primarily grammatical) and concentrating on content words (which designate particular referents in reality), specifically those content words that are employed in a non-neutral manner and seem to play a major role within the speaker's rhetoric. From this perspective, the first term that appears significant is 'people' (1,208 occurrences). In the following lines, Trump's use of it will be studied to illustrate what we may call "the people argument", while other frequent words and phrases will be mentioned throughout the paper.

It is not surprising that people are at the centre of attention in the political arena, especially in a democracy. Corpora of political discourse will therefore reveal numerous occurrences of this term. With 1,068 occurrences of the term, the corpus of political spontaneous discourse used here as a reference corpus is no exception. The following sentences, extracted from the *TPCC*, show how 'people' can refer to Americans (1), to other nationalities (2) or to a general group of individuals (3).

> (1) And we will not allow people into our country who are looking to do harm to our people.

(2) From trade to security, from travel to commerce, we are immensely grateful for our close and deeply valued friendship with the people of Finland. Great people.

(3) But there are many people in the press that are unbelievably dishonest.

In this respect, Trump's use of this term is relatively standard. What appears to be more specific of his political discourse is a type of rhetoric that projects an image of the speaker as wanting to protect the interests of the people against a greedy and corrupt élite. This argument is perhaps best exemplified by the President's inaugural address, in which he stated:

> The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. […] What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people.

It is also due to this aspect of Trump's rhetoric that he has been repeatedly, albeit not unanimously, labelled a populist[1](a word that never occurs in the corpus) by the press and the academic community alike. According to Moffit, for instance, the appeal to 'the people' as opposed to 'the élite' is a key feature of populism (2016: 29). In such contexts, the word 'people' loses the connotation it had in the previous examples and is employed to indicate a vast community of common citizens, or, in Trump's words, the 'struggling families' that the U.S. government has neglected for a long time. Interestingly, a closer look at the corpus reveals that President Trump makes a more careful use of such allusions in press conferences, although, on one occasion, he does affirm his will to 'drain the swamp of corruption in Washington D.C.' This metaphor, first employed by Ronald Reagan, associates the 'swamp' with Washington bureaucracy, implying that it should be eliminated. It must also be noted that the hashtag #DrainTheSwamp was the most recurrent in Trump's tweets during the last month of the 2016 presidential campaign (Demata 2018: 77-78).

It is thus clear that Trump may use the word 'people' to draw a distinction between the establishment and the rest of the citizens. Where he stands is equally

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[1] Meaning, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, 'a person who seeks to represent or appeal to the interests of ordinary people'. Some claim, however, that there is a discrepancy between Trump's populist rhetoric and his policies, which tend to favour the élite. See, for example, Lakoff (2017) and Krugman (2019). Besides, it can be argued that all politicians need to appeal to the interests of potential voters.

evident: 'I'm a people person', he said in a joint press conference with Theresa May (2017). The fact that he places such a high value on 'people', though, is not only significant per se, but also because it has major implications in the way he can exhibit the people's point of view to confirm, bolster and legitimise his own. In other words, if people are the engine of the country, their opinions – and the opinions attributed to them – are parameters of vital importance. Therefore, claiming that people agree with the President may be a way to affirm that the President is right. Our corpus suggests that this is one of Trump's main arguments. Let us consider the following extracts (my italics):

(4) In other words, the media is trying to attack our administration because they know we are following through on pledges that we made, and they're not happy about it for whatever reason. But *a lot of people* are happy about it. In fact, I'll be in Melbourne, Florida, five o'clock on Saturday, and I heard — just heard that the crowds are massive that want to be there.

(5) *A lot of people* respect it; *some people* don't. *Some people* say, "Oh, you should go in immediately." And *other people* are so thrilled at what I'm doing.

(6) Number two, *the people of our country* are very angry at the NFL. All you have to do is look at their ratings and look at their stadiums. You see empty seats where you never saw them before.

Example (4) is rather emblematic of what has been observed so far. Trump counterposes criticism from the press against the people's approval, presenting the supposed high attendance of his event in Melbourne as evidence of his irreproachable conduct. In so doing, he delegitimises the press – a category often associated with the concept of establishment – and sheds positive light on himself. The use of a similar contrast-based argument is also found in example (5), where Trump exploits a more sophisticated rhetorical device. In this press conference (September 2019), Trump is discussing his policy on Iran and claims to be showing 'great restraint'. This time, he opposes two distinct types of 'people': those who 'respect' this and those who do not. When referring to the former, he uses a positively evaluated quantifier ('a lot of'), whereas he simply designates the latter (his detractors) as 'some people'. In the following sentence, 'some people' comes first, preserving the same negative evaluation as before, while the last words are again devoted to Trump's supporters, described as 'other people' who are 'so thrilled' (an emphatic and positively evaluated term). Trump is thus using a chiasmus, that is, an a-b, b-a structure. Besides being unusual for an off-the-cuff,

unscripted answer, this structure allows the speaker to highlight the opposition between two elements, one positively and one negatively evaluated, with an overall positive evaluation of the whole block. Once again, the authority of people has a central role. It can also be weaponized to discredit those who do not seem to have the people on their side, as in (6). This extract is part of Trump's comment on the decision of some NFL players to kneel during the national anthem to protest against his policies (October 2017). Confronted with such criticism, Trump focuses on the people, asserting that the NFL is losing their support. This implies that Trump has no responsibility. Instead, the NFL is to be blamed, and the fact that they are losing popularity is offered as proof.

This leads us to another word that Trump uses in (6): *ratings*. In Trump's rhetoric, ratings seem to be a powerful tool to either empower himself or delegitimise certain opponents. It is indeed for these purposes that Trump uses the word *ratings* in each of the 8 occurrences found in the *TPCC* (whereas in our reference corpus the terms 'ratings' and 'rating', used with the same purpose, are only mentioned three times in total). Here is a case in point (my italics):

> (7) I think you should — honestly, I think you should let me run the country, you run CNN […] and if you did it well, your *ratings* would be much better.

As ratings measure the people's approval of someone, they perfectly fit in the type of argumentation we have studied so far, which we have termed "the people argument". A rhetoric that prioritises people's opinions, or reported opinions, viewing them as semi-truths, reasonably exploits ratings as valuable *ethos* credentials for speaking. Those who do not have 'good ratings' are thus delegitimised. In Trump's press conferences, this is a risk his antagonistic interlocutors run, and to which media outlets such as 'failing', 'unwatchable'[2] *CNN* are particularly exposed.

We have included the people argument in the section devoted to *logos* because it lies on the rational assumption that the will of the people must guide the government's actions. However, Trump's recurrent references to people are also linked to *pathos* (see chapter 2). On these occasions, the persuader emphasises that 's/he represents certain important interests that include the audience in their

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[2] These are some of the numerous terms that Trump has applied to *CNN* and the media in the past. His use of nicknames to delegitimise his critics and opponents is analysed in paragraph 3.1.

benefits' (Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005: 33). Linguistic behaviour of this kind clearly relies on emotions to persuade the public. In fact,

> Nothing can be more persuasive to an audience than the sense that, with the speaker, they are deeply involved in the issue, responding honestly to its demands, and jointly reaching a decision.

> (Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005: 36)

1.2 Appeal to authority and attribution

In the construction of a logical argument, one of the models the persuader can follow is the appeal to some sort of authority, or the attribution of an utterance to a certain source. These techniques are forms of footing shift, which, as shown by Clayman (1992), is fundamental to attain neutrality when making assertions or asking questions. Information coming from an authoritative source is less likely to be questioned and helps the persuader avoid criticism. By using this rhetorical device, a speaker may be able to detach themselves from the information they provide and deflect responsibility in case of necessity. Donald Trump is aware of this possibility. The following extract is taken from a joint press conference with Angela Merkel (March 2017), in which Trump was asked if he regretted promoting claims, later rejected by the UK, that the British intelligence had wiretapped his phones.

> (8) And just to finish your question, we said nothing. All we did was quote a certain very talented legal mind who was the one responsible for saying that on television. I didn't make an opinion on it. That was a statement made by a very talented lawyer on Fox. And so you shouldn't be talking to me, you should be talking to Fox, okay?

Trump answers by pointing out that his administration has only reported someone else's opinion, thus declining any responsibility. The authoritativeness of the source is made explicit by the hyperbolic language employed to refer to him: a 'very talented legal mind' and 'a very talented lawyer'. It is also strengthened by the fact that the statement in question has been broadcast by Fox, projected as a reliable source. Within this frame, Trump presents himself as a mere "animator" of a thought that belongs to a third person, who is held as the "author" and "principal" of that statement, that is, the person from which that statement originated and whose viewpoint is being expressed (Goffman 1981: 145).

Another defensive strategy that a speaker may adopt consists in refusing to acknowledge the authoritativeness of a certain source. For instance, Partington (2003: 95-96) has demonstrated how, in White House press briefings, the podium may choose not to comment on a story reported by sources that are not deemed reliable, such as the so-called tabloid newspapers. Similarly, Trump frequently downplays, questions or jokes about the relevance of questions coming from specific media outlets on the grounds that they report 'fake news'. There are 37 occurrences of the cluster 'fake news' in the *TPCC*, a significant number compared to the 2 occurrences found in the reference corpus. A contextualisation of these reveals that, although the term is mostly used broadly to refer to US media, it can also designate specific media outlets. In the *TPCC*, we find the term 'fake news' in association with *The New York Times* (1 occurrence) and *CNN* (4 occurrences), which is even referred to as 'Fake News CNN'. On occasion, other medias are treated with suspicion, such as *ABC*, *The Washington Post* and *NBC* ('possibly worse than CNN'). Now, if it is not unusual to reject a question asked by a source whose credibility is universally questioned, dismissing a network like *CNN* as mendacious is nonetheless controversial, although it is true that these are traditionally Democrat-supporting media outlets. This kind of delegitimisation is also useful on a practical level, because it allows the President to evade potentially face-threatening questions, as in the following extract.

(9) Q   Can I ask you a question? (Inaudible.)

PRESIDENT TRUMP: No. No. John Roberts, go ahead. CNN is fake news. I don't take questions — I don't take questions from CNN. CNN is fake news. I don't take questions from CNN.

Besides being a compelling defensive device, the appeal to authority can also function as a means to reinforce one's statements, increase one's credibility and eventually win an argument, all of which may result in a better ability to persuade. In some cases, it can constitute a solid, undisputable basis for a more complete and personal argumentation. It may be argued that the role of the President of the United States makes him *ipso facto* a credible and widely trusted authority, therefore relieving him of the need to seek a neutralistic stance. Nevertheless, the President might want to appear to provide truthful information by adopting a relatively neutral approach. Since poorly documented assertions will likely be called into question by the media, it is also in his interest to avoid such criticism by appealing to other authorities and building a more stable argumentation. This appears to be particularly

true in what has been called a 'post-truth' era, in which the border between objective facts and well-crafted sophisms is said to be more blurred than ever[3].

A persuader can turn to several kinds of authorities: the authority of other influential people or historical figures, for example, but also the authority of numbers, statistics and official documents. As for the first type, our corpus shows that Trump rarely quotes historical figures. Sporadic quotations can be found in the preliminary part of a press conference, in which the President follows a script. For instance, he quotes Winston Churchill in a joint press conference with Theresa May (June 2019), and makes reference to a sentence by General Lafayette during a press conference with Emmanuel Macron (July 2017). Contemporary public figures and opinion makers are more easily found in the corpus, as well as official sources such as the FBI. Numbers are also mentioned frequently and with precision, especially when used to quantify sums of money. Yet, a general vagueness appears to characterise Trump's spontaneous discourse whenever we look at his use of reporting verbs such as 'to say', 'to state', 'to agree', 'to announce', 'to tell' and phrases such as 'according to'. Although factual statements with specified sources may be found (see example 10), the great majority of occurrences suggest a lack of clarity in the information provided (my italics).

(10) *As stated in the joint declaration*, the United States and Poland continue to enhance our security cooperation.

(11) *A lot of people say* having Russia — which is a power — having them inside the room is better than having them outside the room. By the way, there were *numerous people* during the G7 that felt that way.

(12) Walmart just *announced* numbers that were, I mean, *mindboggling numbers*.

In example (11), the source of the information ('a lot of / numerous people') is too general, resulting in what is defined as vague attribution of a given statement. In example (12), although the source of information is stated, it is the information itself that remains vague. Indeed, the numbers in question are not quantified in any way. Of course, vague attribution is not specific to Trump's rhetoric. However, it is less prevalent in our reference corpus of spontaneous discourse, where the clusters

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[3] In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries made 'post-truth' its 'word of the year'. This adjective, 'relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeal [or 'spin']', was often used that year with reference to Brexit and the presidential election in the United States. See https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/ (Accessed June 18, 2020).

'people say' and 'people think' are less than half as frequent as in the *TPCC*. Instead, this stratagem is largely employed by the press when they pose questions, through a variety of phrases such as 'There are a lot of people who say…'; 'Some people ask themselves…'; or 'how do you respond to the critics who say…'.

Above all, what emerges from the analysis of Trump's use of reporting verbs is the anectodical nature of his speech. He frequently reports the conversations he has had with other influent interlocutors by reproducing the features of a spontaneous, informal chat. In the following extract, Trump is reporting a conversation with Ambassador David Friedman about the transfer of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

> (13) And I said, "What's this $1 billion?" He said, "I can build it for $150,000." I said, "What?" He said, "I can build it for $150,000"—the Embassy. "We have a building, we have the site. We already own the site; we own the building. I can take a corner of the building, and for $150,000 we can fix it up, make it beautiful, open our Embassy. Instead of in 10 years from now, we can open it up in 3 months." And that's what we did.

As suggested by the informal tone and the use of direct reported speech, Trump is engaging in a very natural conversation with the press. Although he presents another person's viewpoint as well as his own, it seems that he is not interested in assuming a neutralistic pose, but rather in entertaining the audience with a personal narrative. Indeed, in standard conversation 'neutrality is not the usual presumption' (Partington 2003: 91) and speakers produce statements with which their interlocutors are often supposed to agree (Pomerantz, 1984). When Trump's personal narrative constitutes the whole content of a statement and no further information is provided apart from the anecdote in itself, as in example (13), the audience is implicitly asked to trust his words and accept his response as a satisfactory answer to the question that has been posed. At times, the request to acknowledge the speaker as a reliable source is made explicit through phrases such as "I can tell you" (50 occurrences), "I will tell you" (46 occurrences), "believe me" (19 occurrences) and "believe it or not" (10 occurrences), none of which occur with such a frequency in the reference corpus. In so doing, Trump seems to convey the message that he is telling the truth and can be trusted, without necessarily providing evidence for what he is stating. Moreover, he appears to achieve a spontaneity and an authenticity that suit not only the impromptu, discursive nature of press conferences, but also the expectations of voters, given that:

[V]oters tend to vote according to personality traits like "likeability" and authenticity" rather than a candidate's experience or policy positions (e.g., Aylor, 1999; Hacker, 2004; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986)

(Sclafani 2018: 14)

1.3 Evaluation and hyperbolic language

A universally acknowledged characteristic of Donald Trump's discourse is its explicitness. His tendency to speak his mind with little hesitation has been visible since the very first stages of his presidential campaign and before. Another aspect that we may deem explicit is his use of evaluation, or attitude (mentioned in paragraph 1.1). According to Thompson's definition (2014: 80), 'Attitude can be simply defined as the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something (a person, thing, action, event, situation, idea, etc.) is good or bad'. This can be expressed implicitly, if 'the speaker or writer provides no obvious linguistic clues, but exploits the audience's ability to recognise a good – or bad – thing when they see it' (Partington and Taylor 2018: 19); or explicitly, through lexical or grammatical means. The *TPCC* shows that explicit or overt evaluation obtained through evaluative lexis is prevalent in Trump's spontaneous discourse.

Keeping in mind that the corpus is composed of 6,416 word types, we have analysed the 200 most frequent of these. The following table lists the evaluative adjectives that have been found – except comparative and superlative forms – in order of frequency.

Adjectives	*Number of occurrences*	*Evaluation*
Great	816	Positive
Good	600	Positive
Many	570	Variable
Tremendous	282	Mainly positive
Big	222	Mainly positive
Important	195	Mainly positive
Bad	181	Negative
Incredible	167	Mainly positive
Strong	158	Positive

The extensive use of such adjectives points to Trump's propensity to consistently and abundantly specify the qualities of the things and people he mentions. The corpus also shows that certain adjectives are particularly recurrent in specific arguments. Trump's administration, for example, is often said to have done 'a very good job'; an opinion is shared by 'many people'; advantages and problems are usually 'big'; 'bad people' are responsible for 'bad things' which a 'strong country' can overcome by means of 'strong laws' and 'strong borders', and so forth. Adjectives are sometimes so evaluative that Trump's language appears overtly hyperbolic. The adjectives 'great', 'tremendous' and 'incredible' play an important role in this process. Not only are they employed to exaggerate information, but they also contribute to the vagueness of language, which has been discussed earlier (paragraph 1.2). For instance, in the sentence 'We're taking in tremendous amounts of money', the audience is not told anything specific about the actual amount of money in question. Indeed, the principal use of such adjectives, which perform a rhetorical function, is 'that of indicating the speaker's approbation or admiration for something' (Lakoff 1973: 51).

To understand the extent to which hyperbole is exploited in Trump's spontaneous discourse, it may be useful to consider that 'great' is the most frequent descriptive adjective in the whole corpus, with up to 60 occurrences in a single press conference (September 27, 2018). Only 15% of these occurrences can be found in our reference corpus – where 'great' comes after several other adjectives – with a peak of 11 occurrences in a single communicative situation (in Mike Pence's 2016 vice-presidential debate). In fact, each of the hyperbolic adjectives we have seen has a notably lower number of occurrences in the reference corpus. The adjective 'tremendous', with only 10 occurrences in the reference corpus, is particularly emblematic of this phenomenon, so that it might be regarded as a hallmark of Trump's idiolect.

The overall hyperbolic effect is also attained through other tools, especially intensifiers and superlatives. The two main intensifiers are 'very' (2,528 occurrences in the corpus) and 'really' (539 occurrences). They usually precede adjectives and adverbs and can be used twice to obtain stronger emphasis, as in the sentence: 'It's very, very sad — for them. But I'm very, very happy with the result'. 'Really' is also employed to reinforce verbs, especially when the President is expressing a strong belief ('And I really believe that Boris Johnson will be a great Prime Minister'). It is interesting to note that, in Trump's discourse, intensifiers are

sometimes associated with adjectives that are already emphatic and usually employed on their own. This is the case of: 'very exceptional', 'very great', 'very horrible' and 'very terrible', none of which can be found in the reference corpus. Superlatives, too, are widespread. They have always be used in relation to what Aristotle termed 'the topic of Size', whereby 'all of us have to argue that things are bigger or smaller than they seem, whether we are making political speeches, speeches of eulogy or attack, or prosecuting or defending in the law-courts' (Aristotle 2000: 64). On the other hand, as reported in a *New York Times* article,

> More than most presidents, Mr. Trump appears driven by a quest for superlatives — whatever he is doing must be the first, the most, the biggest — and it shapes his policy choices even as he frames his own narrative with the branding skills of a career in business and entertainment.

> (Baker, 2019)

Using the "concordance tool" of AntConc to search words with the "-est" termination allows us to identify a wide range of superlatives. With the help of superlatives, the administration's achievements can become the 'best in history', the economy can be portrayed as the 'strongest in the world' and the U.S. can be described as having "the cleanest air we've ever had'. The extensive use of superlatives in qualitative, subjective statements magnifies the speaker's statements while making it difficult to distinguish between truth and simple exaggeration. However, an incorrect use of superlatives may backfire.

> (14) Q […] Very simply, you said today that you had the biggest electoral margins since Ronald Reagan with 304 or 306 electoral votes. In fact, President Obama got 365 in 2008.

> THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm talking about Republican. Yes.

> Q President Obama, 332. George H.W. Bush, 426 when he won as President. So why should Americans trust —

> THE PRESIDENT: Well, no, I was told — I was given that information. I don't know. I was just given. We had a very, very big margin.

> Q I guess my question is, why should Americans trust you when you have accused the information they receive of being fake when you're providing information that's fake?

In this case, a member of the press points out that Trump has wrongly used a superlative. This serves as a basis for his accusation that Trump is lying to Americans.

We have so far seen how explicit evaluation and hyperbolic language allow for the President's strongly evaluative remarks. When the emphasis on a certain statement needs to be further increased, another device may come into play: the marking of importance through particular structures (Partington 2013). Marking the importance or relevance of a statement means using language to draw the audience's attention to what has just been said (anaphoric reference) or is about to be said (cataphoric reference). Trump employs both these modalities. Some examples follow (my italics).

> (15) The unions — we've got things on wages and we've got things on the environment that few people have ever been able to get into an agreement. *And it's a very big deal. It's a very big deal. And it's a great deal.*

> (16) I think *it's a very important thing* for the NFL to not allow people to kneel during the playing of our national anthem, to respect our country and to respect our flag.

> (17) Mexico was totally — I mean, *they were great. By the way*, the new President *has been great*.

While in (15) we find an example of importance marking with anaphoric purpose, extracts (16) and (17) contain examples of cataphoric references. The discourse marker 'by the way' – that has been described as a peculiarity of Trump's idiolect allowing him to change the topic abruptly (Sclafani 2018: 47-52) – is here considered as an importance marking device since it appears to create expectations on what is about to be stated, which is presumably what Trump intends to foreground. It must be noted that 'by the way' is twice as common in the *TPCC* as in the reference corpus. The marking of importance, besides being common in both scripted and unscripted discourse, is in line with Trump's tendency to frequently employ evaluative lexis. Trump uses explicit evaluation and importance marking even in situations where other speakers would simply leave them implicit, expecting the audience to evaluate the utterance properly based on their shared values. In the following extract, for instance, underlying the importance of the circumstances in question appears superfluous (my italics).

(18) Well, I haven't heard him say that. But he did invite me to Russia for the defeat of Nazis — *that's a big thing* — defeat of Nazis.

2. Pathos

Pathos is the attempt to persuade an audience by appeal to emotions. As subtle as it may seem, this is a widespread rhetorical technique. In fact, 'emotion is the "raw material" of rhetoric, because without real (or simulated) emotion, effective persuasion is unlikely to take place, whatever the issue involved' (Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005: 57). The appeal to emotions is frequently associated with the 'post-truth' tendency to value the 'spin' with which information is presented more than the information itself (see the OED definition of 'post-truth' in paragraph 1.2). We have already mentioned *pathos* in the section devoted to *logos* (chapter 1) and we need to repeat here that every single argument tends to contain appeals to both *logos* and *pathos*. In the present section, we will analyse some features of Trump's spontaneous discourse that appear to specifically reflect an emotional approach to persuasion.

2.1 Hooray and boo words

The terms 'hooray words' and 'boo words', coined by Jamie Whyte (2003: 61-63), designate words that arouse an immediate positive or negative reaction from the audience. The nature of such reaction may depend on the audience in question. A certain term can turn out to be a hooray word for an audience and a boo word for another, depending on their beliefs. Terms such as 'capitalist' and 'socialist', for instance, will hardly spark the same emotional reaction in a left-wing and in a right-wing audience (Partington and Taylor 2018: 30). The same goes for 'wall' and 'politically correct', which tend to arouse opposite responses from Trump's supporters and his critics. In most cases, though, the response of an audience to hooray and boo words is univocal, as proved by the fact that few people would affirm, for instance, that they are against 'authenticity' or in favour of 'injustice' (Whyte 2003; Partington and Taylor 2018). It is therefore quite safe for a persuader to appeal to such words, which convey a message about the image that the persuader wishes to project upon the audience. What hooray and boo words do not convey, however, is information concerning how such concepts can be applied outside rhetoric. A speaker may promise 'social justice', but what it consists in (just equality

of opportunity or also redistribution of wealth?) and what will be done to achieve it remains to be seen, and is the controversial part.

In this, President Trump seems to have a different approach than other politicians. In fact, he says he is reluctant to talk of himself as a politician ('I can't believe I'm saying I'm a politician, but I guess that's what I am now'). Embracing the category of politicians might spark a 'boo' reaction from the audience and would contrast with Trump's image as a 'people person' (paragraph 1.1). A similar effect would probably be obtained if Trump dwelled on standard hooray words such as 'hope', 'justice', 'education' and on their negative counterparts. While these terms appear in the corpus, they do not recur, and are mostly found in the initial scripted parts of press conferences, along with other common hooray words including 'peace', 'prosperity' and 'freedom'. In spontaneous discourse, instead, it seems that Trump aims to present himself as efficient rather than rhetorically skilled. As he stated, 'you know, the problem that's been happening over the last 20 years is people have talked—you said it—it's all talk, it's no action. And we're going to take action'.

However, he too has his sets of evaluatively opposite words that are meant to arouse specific emotions in the audience. First of all, words related to the idea of winning or losing. No one is against 'victory', and Trump often presents himself as a winner as well as a leader who wants his country to win. On the contrary, his opponents are associated with the idea of losing or failing, as shown in the example below (my italics).

> (19) But yesterday showed no collusion, no obstruction. We are doing really well. That was an excuse by the Democrats who *lost* an election that some people think they shouldn't have *lost*, because it's almost impossible for the Democrats to *lose* the Electoral College, as you know. We have to run up the whole East Coast and you have to *win* everything as a Republican. And that's just what we did.

Similarly, a 'strong' economy, 'tough' policies and 'high quality' (a characteristic that Trump mainly attributes to people) are the prerogatives of his administration. Opponents and former administrations are instead described as 'weak' and 'low-quality'. Even his famous slogan 'Make America Great Again' (first used by Ronald Reagan in his 1980 presidential campaign, then occasionally employed by Bill Clinton) presupposes that America has been damaged by recent administrations. While these are said to have allowed other countries to treat America unfairly, Trump promises to restore trade equity by means of excellent deals, 'deal' being

one of his most recurrent hooray words. The *TPCC* occurrences of all such hooray and boo words outnumber those in the reference corpus, suggesting that other speakers tend to use *pathos* differently. A contrastive analysis shows, for example, that the clusters 'high quality' and 'low quality' never appear in the reference corpus; the verbs 'to win' and 'to lose' are employed more prudently by other speakers; and there is a significant quantitative difference in the use of the word 'deal' (408 occurrences in the *TPCC* against 113 in the reference corpus).

Of course, we are left with some questions. We may wonder, for example, whether winning the audience's votes is a sufficient condition to be able to run a country; or what strong border policies imply in practice; or else what it means to make a fair deal. Yet, Trump's arguments are morally unassailable. The President cannot be blamed for wanting his country to be successful, strong and fairly treated, let alone for having managed to make this real. It is indeed with a compelling appeal to rage and pity that he sarcastically comments on his possible impeachment:

> (20) Do you impeach somebody because he created the greatest economic success in the history of our country? "Let's impeach him because the country is so successful. Let's impeach him." "Has he done anything wrong?" They asked somebody, "Has he done anything wrong?" "No, but let's impeach him anyway."

2.2 Repetition

After looking at Trump's hooray / boo words and phrases, we shall now consider how he inserts these elements in the syntactic structure of his discourse in order to better appeal to the audience's emotions. From this point of view, repetition appears to be particularly relevant. Cockcroft and Cockcroft (2005: 182) define it 'probably the major resource of schematic rhetoric and the one with closest affinity to the spontaneous expression of emotion'. As for Trump's discourse,

> Donald Trump's extensive use of repetition has been described as a substitute for substantive explanations (Lakoff, 2016 [April 6]) or as a technique to strengthen hearers' neural circuitry and beliefs about candidates' attributes (G. Lakoff, quoted in Rossman, 2017).

> (Sclafani 2018: 11)

By repetition we do not only mean the simple reiteration of a lexical element or phrase, particularly common in anaphoric importance marking, such as 'And the

denuclearization is a very important — it's a very important word'; we also consider the repeating of lexico-syntactic structures with some degree of variation, including bicolons, tricolons and contrasting elements. For example:

> (21) let me just tell you, very simple: Because they're very weak on crime. Because they have often suggested — members and people within the Democrat Party, at a high level, have suggested getting rid of ICE, getting rid of law enforcement. That's not going to happen, okay? We want to be strong on the borders. We want to be strong on law enforcement.

In this extract, the liberal use of repetition is as evident as the contrast between 'strong' and 'weak'. First, the initial repetition of the phrase 'because they' reinforces Trump's criticism of the Democrats as well as the binary opposition between 'they' and 'we'. In the second sentence, the phrase 'they have (often) suggested' is repeated twice, before and after Trump's clarification of the subject ('members and people within the Democratic Party'). This introduces a two-part phrase or bicolon based on the repetition of the phrase 'getting rid of', followed by a variable element – first 'ICE', then 'law enforcement'. The remark ends with another bicolon consisting in repeating 'We want to be strong on'; the word 'borders' reminds of the aforementioned ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), and 'law enforcement' is repeated for the second time. It is worth noting that while the first part of the statement – centred on the Democrats ('they') – is negatively evaluated, the subsequent repetition of the adjective 'strong', in association with the pronoun 'we', allows for a positive evaluation of the final part. In the following example, evaluation maintains an important role (my italics).

> (22) The trade deal with South Korea has been fully renegotiated and is ready for signature. We may sign it at the United Nations or shortly thereafter. That was a *terrible deal* for the United States. Now it's a *fair deal*.

The last two sentences introduce a contrast in terms of time and quality: what was terrible in the past has now become fair. The term 'deal' is repeated twice in two similar syntactic structures, but its adjectives vary, and so does the evaluation. This is a contrasting pair, that is, a bicolon whose two parts carry opposite evaluation. Contrasting pairs are key to emphasising binary oppositions such as the one between 'they' (opponents) and 'us' (persuaders), a common emotion-based argument in political discourse.

Another way to express evaluation through repetition is what has been called 'forced priming' (Duguid 2009), that is, 'a process whereby speakers or authors frequently repeat a certain form of words to deliberately 'flood' the discourse with messages for a particular strategic purpose' (Duguid and Partington: 67). Forced primings carry a positive evaluation for the speaker's side or a negative evaluation for the opponents, and are meant to spread in political discourse through both traditional media and social media, where the voting public can encounter them. The short, general, and often strongly evaluative statements which are frequently repeated in Trump's spontaneous discourse seem to have all the core features of the 'soundbites' that usually capture the public's attention in political discourse. These are indeed 'phrases which are fairly short, may be rhythmical or contain rhetorical flourishes, but are assertive, evaluative, vague and of course reiterated" (Duguid and Partington: 74). The way in which Trump has associated the problem of drugs with Mexico and the Mexican people, thus emphasising the need for 'stronger border security' and ultimately a border wall, is a relevant example. If we exclude the instances in which the word 'drugs' designates medications, there are 15 occurrences of this term in the *TPCC*. In 13 of these, 'drugs' is used in combination with the words 'border', 'wall' or 'Mexico'. Another interesting element frequently associated with 'drugs' is the verb 'to pour' (8 occurrences in this context), used in sentences such as (my italics):

> (23) On top of that, the border is soft and weak, drugs are *pouring in*, and I'm not going to let that happen

> (24) Drugs are *pouring across our border*. We're stopping it, but we need a wall to really stop it. We need a wall in this country. You know it. I know it. Everybody knows it. We have to have a wall, so that's going to be part of it.

> (25) The wall will stop much of the drugs from *pouring into this country* and poisoning our youth.

This verb is used metaphorically to provide an explanation as to how drugs arrive in the Unites States. Relying on its semantic meaning, Trump conveys the message that the passage of drugs across the border is abundant and uncontrolled, and that something must be done to prevent this. A quick research on the Internet shows that the expression has been seized and reused by media outlets and political figures alike, even though it is often employed to quote Trump. Interestingly, 'flow of drugs' is another phrase which commonly designates this process and has already been used for this purpose in the past (the Corpus of Contemporary American

English[4] provides examples dating back to 1990). Although on a semantic level it is not as strong as 'drugs are pouring in', both phrases describe a similar process and exploit water as the 'source' of the metaphor which is thus created.

It finally seems appropriate to point out that, while repetition can be used strategically to bestow elegance and *pathos* on a speech, we are now analysing an impromptu communicative situation. Despite repetition, Trump's spontaneous discourse does not exactly reproduce the features of a scripted speech. On the contrary, such use of repetition may often appear improvised and clumsy because it is not planned. It is not uncommon to encounter sentences such as:

> (26) We've given out orders for the best fighter jets in the world, the best ships, the best everything.

In this example, Trump seems to employ the word 'everything' for lack of a more precise term to complete the tricolon. While he could have expressed this concept in a more elegant and informative fashion by stopping to think of a third element, his solution nonetheless reflects the way speakers behave in standard conversation. We may thus argue that this contributes to the audience's perception of Trump as being at ease and authentic.

3. Ethos

By *ethos* we mean the persuader's ability to establish their credentials for speaking by displaying their personal qualities. This type of persuasion mainly relies on the persuader's personality and the projection of a certain image onto the audience. Indeed, 'his [the speaker's] character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses' (Aristotle, 2000: 4).

Aristotle's concept of *ethos* has been adopted and updated in more modern sociolinguistics in the notion of 'face' (and 'face-work'), which 'may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (Goffman 1967: 5). It is possible to identify two aspects of face:

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[4] Available at: https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/. Accessed June 25, 2020.

(a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition

(b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants

(Brown and Levinson 1987: 61)

A person's face (both positive and negative) can be threatened in various ways, and it is normally in the interest of that person to 'save face', preventing other people or particular circumstances from putting their image at risk. More precisely, let us consider that:

> Any act which puts pressure on the hearer to do something – order, request, suggestion, reminding and so on – potentially threatens their negative face, as would any act (giving a gift, paying a compliment) which entails the hearer incurring a debt. Any act which could be construed as demonstrating a lack of care for the hearer's desires and goals is a potential threat to the latter's positive face, for example, criticism and disapproval but also contradiction, challenge, even interruption, or simply the failure to show alignment and agreement with their views.

(Partington 2003: 125)

While in formal and semi-formal interactions it is customary not to threaten the face of one's interlocutors, several exceptions to this rule exist. For example, forms of 'banter' such as 'jocular mockery' and 'jocular abuse', which entail to some extent a face threat, are the norm in many groups of close friends, especially males (Haugh and Bousfield 2012). More importantly, a similar phenomenon occurs in political interviews, where the face rights of the interviewee are deliberately suspended. Jucker observes that in such settings the interviewee's face is usually threatened by the interviewer. Interviewees pose a threat to their own faces if they appear to accept criticism or blame (1986: 71). In light of the numerous similarities with political interviews, the same logic can also be applied to press conferences.

We have already observed how the President's face can be threatened by certain questions and how he may choose to respond. In the following paragraphs we shall further analyse his behaviour in relation to his own face and that of his interlocutors during press conferences.

3.1 Ad hominem: from comparison to nicknaming

An *ad hominem* or *ad personam* fallacy is an argument that focuses not so much on a given topic but rather on the people that have brought it up. It is regarded as a non-rational argument as well as a face-threatening act, but in practice it can be highly psychologically effective in 'competitive persuasion'. In this paragraph, we take into consideration the 'abusive *ad hominem* attack', in which 'the argument has degenerated into personal abuse and vilification' (Douglas, 1987: 6) and other milder forms of attacks directed towards specific individuals or groups of people. As is common in such cases, Trump's *ad hominem* attacks are key to delegitimising his opponents as well as projecting a winning image of himself and his administration. We have already seen in paragraph 1.2 that a targeted attack on a media outlet constitutes an attempt to delegitimise it. Attacks directed to single members of the press may also ensue, especially in the form of retaliation for face-threatening questions. The following extract is the continuation of the remark reported in example (7), paragraph 1.1. In an already conflictual exchange, a *CNN* journalist (Jim Acosta) asks whether Trump is concerned about indictments following the Russian investigation, which he promptly dismisses as a 'hoax' (a term often employed as a substitute for 'fake news'). However, the journalist continues to formulate his question.

> (27) THE PRESIDENT: That's enough. Put down the mic.
>
> Q Mr. President, are you worried about indictments coming down in this investigation?
>
> THE PRESIDENT: I'll tell you what: CNN should be ashamed of itself having you working for them. You are a rude, terrible person. You shouldn't be working for CNN. […]
>
> THE PRESIDENT: You're a very rude person. The way you treat Sarah Huckabee is horrible. And the way you treat other people are horrible. You shouldn't treat people that way.

In this case, Trump goes so far as to express a strong personal judgement on the journalist's professionalism. He also criticises Acosta's attitude towards other people who are present. In response, another journalist intervenes.

> (28) Q In Jim's defense, I've traveled with him and watched him. He's a diligent reporter who busts his butt like the rest of us.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not a big fan of yours either. So, you know. (Laughter).

Once again, by making a subjective remark on the questioner, Trump uses an *ad hominem* argument rather than addressing the topic at hand.[5]

The same process may be applied to other targets and for different purposes. *Ad hominem* arguments often help the President move the focus to his opponents, providing him with an opportunity not only for a change of topic but also for comparison. Comparison is essential to the process of evaluating oneself positively while presenting one's opponents as negative. For example, when faced with accusations or questioning of any sort, the persuader may decide to underline their opponents' defaults in order to justify themselves. This reminds us of the rhetorical argument called *tu quoque*, whose goal is 'to take the opponent's criticism of your position and deflect the very same criticism back onto his original attacking criticism' (Douglas 1987: 22). We could also describe it as a *two wrongs make a right* argument, whereby speakers justify their wrongs by pointing at those committed by other parties, as in the following example.

> (29) Now, again, maybe I'm not going to be able to do a deal with Russia, but at least I will have tried. And if I don't, does anybody really think that Hillary Clinton would be tougher on Russia than Donald Trump? […] You know, they say I'm close to Russia. Hillary Clinton gave away 20 percent of the uranium in the United States. She's close to Russia.

In this case, Trump first alludes to Clinton's presupposed inability to make a deal with Russia as a compensation for his possible failure. Then, he deflects the claims about his connection with the Russian government by accusing Clinton of being closer to Russia than he is. This is an overt attack on her *ethos*. Moreover, it is not infrequent for him to put emphasis on *pathos* by presenting himself as being treated unfairly. The argument model he uses follows the pattern 'if I had done what (s)he did…', as in the following extract.

> (30) Nobody mentions that Hillary received the questions to the debates. Can you imagine — seriously, can you imagine if I received the questions? It would be the

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[5] This press conference (November 2018) resulted in the revocation of Acosta's 'hard pass' which granted him easy access to the White House. The pass was restored later that month, following a CNN lawsuit.

electric chair, okay? "He should be put in the electric chair." You would even call for the reinstitution of the death penalty, okay?

In this way, Trump avoids concentrating on his actual actions but stresses the fact that he gets more negative coverage than his opponents. Such arguments sometimes include the idea of 'fighting back' against injustice. Relevant is also the expression 'witch hunt' (24 occurrences against 2 occurrences in the reference corpus), a metaphor that Trump employs in relation to the investigation on the alleged Trump-Russia collusion. This parallelism clearly implies that the President is innocent and unjustly accused. In the following example, he deflects criticism on the Democrats and portrays himself as a victim.

(31) Well, I will say this: There is collusion, but it's really with the Democrats and the Russians, far more than it is with the Republicans and the Russians. So the witch hunt continues.

The last form of *ad hominem* attack we shall discuss is the most basic argument encountered in the corpus: nicknaming. Akin to name-calling, albeit less aggressive, this linguistic behaviour is rather specific of Trump's idiolect and very uncommon for a politician in his position[6]. It consists in mentioning some of his opponents by using a negatively evaluated nickname to belittle, discredit or mock them. Nicknames are eloquent as they reflect a quality that Trump associates with the person or category in question. They are invariably placed before these, like adjectives or epithets, as if they were part of the actual name. It is interesting to note that nicknames are usually fixed: as the discourse proceeds, they undergo little or no variation, and the same nickname generally does not designate more than one person or group of people. The association between the nickname and the proper name is therefore quite tight. Here are some of the nicknames found in the corpus.

a) Failing New York Times (5 occurrences)
b) Fake News Media (3 occurrences) / the "corrupt media" (1 occurrence)
c) Little Adam Schiff (2 occurrences)
d) Crooked Hillary (1 occurrence)
e) Do-nothing Democrats (1 occurrence) / the "obstructionists" (1 occurrence)
f) Sleepy Joe [Biden] (1 occurrence)

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[6] George W. Bush, too, is known to have a penchant for nicknames. During his presidency, however, nicknaming seemed to be more a personal habit than a deligitimisation strategy. He would reportedly attribute nicknames to 'practically everyone [he] saw regularly', including his entourage and even himself' (Rountree 2012: 27-28).

g) Amazon-Washington Post[7] (1 occurrence)

In paragraph 1.3, we have analysed the most recurrent emphatic adjectives used by Trump in press conferences. Interestingly, 7 out of 9 adjectives listed in the table are positively or mainly positively evaluated, while only one ('bad') carries a clearly negative evaluation. With nicknames, the opposite is true. We can argue that, if hyperbolic language is Trump's lexical means to express praise, nicknaming is another of his principal strategies for delegitimisation.

It also seems to be quite successful, since other politicians, perhaps lacking an effective strategy to respond to such attacks, have started to make a similar use of nicknaming. In our reference corpus we can find the expression 'Big Donald', used by Marco Rubio after he had in turn been called 'Little Marco'. The well-known expression 'basket of deplorables', employed by Hillary Clinton to designate half of Trump's supporters, also denotes some sort of adaptation to Trump's nicknaming.

Nevertheless, it is true that nicknames are not particularly recurrent considering the size of the *TPCC*, whereas in the presidential campaign Donald Trump made a more extensive and elaborate use of these. Since the presidential primary season, Trump has been known for his frequent use of such nicknames, directed at a large number of his opponents (Chavez and Stracqualursi, 2016). The decrease of nicknames in press conferences might be explained by the fact that, having already won the election, Trump no longer needs to revile his opponents as he did during the campaign. However, this seems unlikely since he has continued to do so in different contexts, for example on Twitter (Edelman 2019). More probably, he modulates his discourse based on his audience, knowing that the press tends to stigmatise him for his use of abusive language. In fact, 'speaker / writer and audience are interdependent in the persuasive process; their reciprocal involvement means that they shape and are shaped by each other' (Cockcroft and Cockcroft 2005: 29). Occasionally, he might also want to sound 'more presidential' following his claim that he could be 'more presidential than any president that's ever held this office' with the exception of Abraham Lincoln (July 2017). Whatever the reason, this seems to demonstrate that there are slight variations in the way Trump utilises

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[7] This is because *Amazon* and *The Washington Post* are owned by the same person, Jeff Bezos. For an exhaustive list of the nicknames used by Donald Trump, see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_nicknames_used_by_Donald_Trump. Accessed June 18, 2020.

language in different situations, as opposed to the common belief that he is unable to adapt his language to the communicative context.

3.2 Face and friendliness

We have noted that Trump employs face-threatening language when confronted with people (the press) or circumstances (e.g. accusations) which in turn threaten his own face. He also does so on social media and during rallies, that is, in situations which do not permit his opponents to respond to criticism through a direct confrontation. However, it is logical to assume that in press conferences, where the President has to personally deal with journalists and often (in joint press conferences) with other participants, he may want to assume a less aggressive *ethos*. This, we argued, should account for the less frequent use of nicknames on such occasions. There are other elements which seem to confirm this. Our corpus shows that, despite his propensity for face-threatening attacks, Trump also tends to show politeness in several ways. For instance, by avoiding threatening the face of other political leaders who participate in joint press conferences. Criticism, disapproval, contradiction, and interruptions of such personalities are almost completely absent from the corpus. This confirms Goffman's assertion that:

> The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants. This means that the line taken by each participant is usually allowed to prevail, and each participant is allowed to carry off the role he appears to have chosen for himself.

(1967: 11)

It is thus comprehensible that Trump wants to save both his face and the face of other participants, not only because this is normal in conversation but also to preserve diplomatic relationships. For instance, in a joint press conference with Theresa May (July 2018), a journalist reminds him that he has in the past criticised May and said that Boris Johnson would be a 'great Prime Minister'. Trump responds by denying criticising May and by praising both her and Johnson. Confirming his criticism would have been a threat to May's positive face as well as a source of uneasiness for both. On the other hand, failing to praise Johnson once again would have been self-contradictory, thus giving the impression that Trump had made a *gaffe*. With his comment, Trump manages to save everyone's face, also conveying

the message that there is reciprocal support and the situation is under control. Likewise, he often presents other political leaders as his friends and underlines that he is in good terms with most of them: 'I have a great relationship with political people. […] We have a fantastic relationship. I'm friends with most of them, I can say' (October 2017). Even his relationship with North Korean leader King Jong-un, famously dubbed "Rocket Man" in some of Trump's 2017 tweets (but not in press conferences), seems to have progressed. During one of the press conferences in the *TPCC*, Trump explains: 'At the beginning, there was a lot of anger between myself and Kim Jong Un, who since — something happened. There was a point at which it happened, and all of a sudden, we get along'.

Trump's exchanges with the press can also be rather friendly, especially when he is not under particular pressure. While, as we have seen, face-threatening questions are met with more hostility, Trump sometimes jokingly encourages journalists to be kind to him (example 32). Ideally, he would appreciate an anodyne question, with no threat being posed to his face. When this occurs, he might decide to 'reward' the journalist by paying special attention to them (example 33).

> (32) THE PRESIDENT: Wait, let's see, who's — I want to find a friendly reporter. Are you a friendly reporter? Watch how friendly he is. Wait, wait — watch how friendly he is. Go ahead. Go ahead.

> (33) Q Mr. President, Melania Trump announced the reopening of the White House Visitors Office. […] And she does a lot of great work for the country as well. Can you tell us a little bit about what First Lady Melania Trump does for the country? […]

> THE PRESIDENT: Now, that's what I call a nice question. That is very nice. Who are you with?

> Q (Inaudible.)

> THE PRESIDENT: Good. I'm going to start watching. Thank you very much.

Several other extracts can be found which see Trump complimenting or joking with the press, sometimes with digressions about personal subjects. On such occasions, he seems to be seeking the complicity of the press as well as conveying a relaxed and self-confident *ethos*.

(34) THE PRESIDENT: By the way, congratulations on your show.

Q   Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: They made a very wise decision.

Q   Thank you very much. Well, we invite you for an interview whenever you're available.

(35) THE PRESIDENT: […] Oh, there's John. I think — you know, you two guys look alike when the light is right on the — the hair is very similar. Let me see, who has better hair? He's got pretty good hair, John, I hate to —

Q   It's the angelic glow of the backlighting, Mr. President, that makes us look so similar. Of course, the denuclearization — nuclear weapons and biological weapons and whatnot — is one problem in North Korea. Another huge problem is the horrible record that they have on human rights. Was that discussed at all?

Such remarks prompt an equally polite and at times humorous response from the press. Although, as in extract (35), these exchanges may not dissuade journalists from posing complex questions, they nonetheless serve a purpose. We may explain this by introducing Partington's distinction between two aspects of positive face: *competence* face and *affective* face. We bolster the former 'by convincing others that we are capable, authoritative and in control'; we reinforce the latter 'by persuading our peers that we are, first of all, non-threatening, but also congenial and good to be around' (2006: 97-98). Instead of focusing uniquely on one of these, speakers, particularly in US politics, need to find a balance in order to project an image of themselves that is neither excessively authoritative nor too friendly. This seems to account for the coexistence, in Trump's spontaneous discourse, of face-threatening attacks and forms of politeness and affability. On the one hand, he presents himself as a strong leader ('I will be representing the American people very, very strongly, very forcefully') as well as an authoritative source, as argued in chapter 1.2; he also does not hesitate to attack his opponents, as we have seen, to the point of claiming: 'I don't really care about offending people. I sort of thought you'd know that' (press conference in June 2019). On the other hand, he seeks to increase his affective face by using humour and friendliness, occasionally even employing self-deprecation, and through spontaneous language, as we shall see more in detail in the next paragraph.

3.3 Lexical simplicity, grammatical intricacy, and the benefits to affective face

The lexical simplicity of Trump's spontaneous discourse is anything but new. In 2015, *The Boston Globe* analysed the candidacy announcements of 19 presidential candidates for the 2016 election. Using an algorithm called Flesch-Kincaid readability test, they were able to show that Tump's was the simplest and could be comprehended by a fourth-grader (Viser 2015). In 2018, a study by the online platform Factbase showed that 'Donald Trump has the most basic, most simplistically constructed, least diverse vocabulary of any President in the last 90 years' (Frischling 2018). The study used various algorithms to analyse transcripts of press conferences, presidential debates and interviews of US Presidents from Hoover forward, also reaching the conclusion that, depending on the scale used, Trump's language is 'between a 3rd and 7th grade reading level'. However, Trump's use of simple language is far from being an isolated case. Other nonpartisan studies cited in *The Globe*'s article point out that the grade level of speeches from members of Congress (Drutman and Drinkard 2012) and of presidential State of the Union addresses (Ostermeier 2012) has declined over time.

Such lexical homogeneity seems to be confirmed by a contrastive analysis of the *TPCC* and our reference corpus. The two corpora contain roughly the same number of tokens, but they differ significantly in terms of word types. While the *TPCC* contains 6,416 word types, the reference corpus has 9,453. Although this may depend on various factors, it nonetheless shows that President Trump uses a less diverse range of words than other speakers in similar communicative situations. A closer look at the word lists reveals that some of the terms that recur in the reference corpus are hardly ever employed by the President. This includes, for instance, the words 'agenda' (2 occurrences in the *TPCC* against 20 occurrences in the reference corpus), 'legislation' (5 occurrences against 41) and 'evidence' (2 occurrences against 61). It is reasonable to assume that this is due to the lexical simplification and repetitiveness of Trump's spontaneous discourse.

Terms and phrases	Number of occurrences in TPCC	Number of occurrences in reference corpus
Many	570	192
A number of	15	43
Several	5	36
Very	2,528	498
Particularly	6	47
Significantly	1	14
People	1,208	1,068
Individuals	2	49
Communities	2	47

For instance, as shown in the table, Trump employs the adjective 'many' far more often than other speakers, whereas these make a more consistent use of slightly more formal terms and phrases with a similar meaning, such as 'a number of' and 'several'. Similarly, the *TPCC* contains over five times as many occurrences of 'very' as the reference corpus, where more occurrences of 'particularly' and 'significantly' can be found. The word 'people', as argued in paragraph 1.1, is naturally recurrent in political speech. Yet, this does not prevent speakers in the reference corpus from employing more specific terms such as 'individuals' and 'communities', as opposed to Trump's tendency towards generalisation.

On a syntactical level, it must be noted that parataxis – the use of short sentences and coordination – characterises both corpora and is generally widespread in spoken communication. However, a qualitative analysis of Trump's press conferences shows that some typical elements of spoken discourse are more likely to be found in his utterances than in those of other speakers. Let us consider, for example, the two following utterances.

(36) Russia is a ruse. Yeah, I know you have to get up and ask a question, so important. Russia is a ruse. I have nothing to do with Russia, haven't made a phone call to Russia in years. Don't speak to people from Russia. Not that I wouldn't, I just have nobody to speak to.

(37) The more this can be nonpartisan, the better served the American people are going to be, which is why I made the point earlier – and I'm going to keep on repeating this point: our vulnerability to Russia or any other foreign power is directly related to how divided, partisan, dysfunctional our political process is.

Sentence (36) is an extract from the *TPCC*, while (37) is from a 2016 Obama press conference. Both sentences are part of a spontaneous response to a question. It can be observed that Trump's answer is made up of several short clauses lacking almost any explicit sign of syntactical coordination or subordination. A brief sarcastic digression can also be found, followed by an adjective which is grammatically detached from the rest of the sentence ('I know you have to get up and ask a question, so important'). The overall impression is that syntax is not established in advance but develops gradually as the sentence unfolds. Conversely, Obama's answer appears to have a more harmonic syntactical structure, whose components are connected through clear coordinating conjunctions. The starting phrase ('the more… the better…') denotes a certain organisation of the syntax, and the final tricolon ('divided, partisan, dysfunctional') is so structured as to create the impression of a *climax*, or *crescendo*. Globally, sentence (37) is likely to be perceived as more elaborate and formal than (36). It could also be argued that Obama's utterance is the one that most resembles a written sentence, not only in that it lacks certain colloquial elements that can be found in Trump's utterance (such as 'Yeah' and the omission of the personal pronoun 'I'), but also because it includes a relatively large number of lexical items in a smaller number of clauses. In other words, it has a higher lexical density. Since high lexical density is a characteristic of written language (Halliday 1989), the listener will perceive this sentence to be suitable for written discourse. This is not the case with Trump, whose discourse does not have the lexical density of Obama's utterance, but the 'dynamic complexity that is regularly associated with natural, spontaneous speech' (Halliday 1989: 87). Both styles are complex in their own way. The difference is that in Trump's spontaneous discourse, as is expected in spoken language, 'Grammatical intricacy takes the place of lexical density' (Halliday 1989: 87). While Obama's utterance is appropriate to the institutional nature of the press conference, Trump's utterance is appropriate to the spoken medium that press conferences require.

This leads us to wonder which of these two approaches should be privileged in such cases. It is here that the notion of positive face may be useful. Indeed, the image of a speaker as professional, competent, friendly or congenial is also projected through these aspects of language. 'Competence face is loosely associated with formality, affective face with informality' (Partington, 2006: 98). If this is true, we can argue that Trump's conversational speaking style – which inevitably appears rather informal – may have a positive impact on his audience, or part of it, because it bolsters his affective face. In this respect, speaking as in sentence (36) may not be

as effective as joking with the press, but it may still have a relevant role in presenting the President as a 'regular guy', a persuader who uses the same linguistic means as the average persuadee. We may conclude that, as pertains to face, several peculiarities of Trump's spontaneous discourse – and of spoken communication in general – are not so disadvantageous as they might seem, even in institutional settings. Limited vocabulary, grammatical intricacy, lexical sparsity and informal speech are not necessarily the core qualities of a skilled rhetorician, but they are at the basis of people's everyday spoken language and can therefore be used, whether consciously or not, to convey a certain *ethos* of oneself. This is the *ethos* of authenticity, or at least 'authenticism', meaning 'the single-minded belief that all that really matters in public language is the supposed authenticity of a given speaker' (Thompson 2016, quoted in Demata 2018: 75). After all, if rhetoric, ever since Plato, has always been viewed with some suspicion (Cockcroft and Cockcroft 2005: 6-7), showing too much proficiency in this regard may turn out to be a double-edged sword.

4. Conclusion

The present analysis has sought, with the aid of the considerable amount of data provided by our corpora, to offer an overview of the characteristics that make President Trump's spontaneous discourse what it is. The results of this study seem to confirm at least in part what had already been intuited by those who perceive Trump's language as disruptive, or revolutionary. Trump's use of language, in the circumstances we have considered, is indeed rich in distinctive elements which do not seem to recur in other politicians' discourse, regardless of the mode of persuasion we analyse. These elements recur consistently in the broad sample of press conferences we have seen. For instance, it has been shown that Trump tends to exploit the authority of the people to present himself as successful, therefore more authoritative than his opponents or whoever is not supported by 'ratings'. This frequently translates into a propensity to offer himself as the only reliable source of information, as opposed to his critics or certain media outlets, who are described as mendacious. In Trump's discourse, vague attribution and a general lack of precision are common. This is evident in his use of hyperbolic language, whether he is highlighting his accomplishments or stigmatising his opponents. The deligitimisation of his detractors is common and occurs through various means, for example the use of not entirely rational argumentation (such as the *ad personam*) or nicknames. Moreover, Trump's off-the-cuff utterances show an extensive use of

short sentences, simple vocabulary, and repetition, used along with importance marking devices to highlight the main message. These add an emotional dimension, which is also attained through the use of words that are typical of Trump's idiolect as well as likely to arouse an emotional response from the audience. Yet, Trump's discourse is not always unconventional. Standard norms of politeness are respected in specific situations, and he occasionally attempts to make jokes and to deal with the press or other political leaders in a non-threatening manner. He also seems to alter his linguistic behaviour depending on the communicative context, without renouncing the main features of his discourse.

These and other characteristics contribute to creating a linguistic image of Donald Trump which is in a way coherent with the image of himself he has projected since the presidential campaign. Before being elected, Trump was regarded, including by himself, as an outsider. To some extent, he still does: we have discussed, for example, his apparent reluctance to describe himself as a politician. His linguistic attitude is therefore appropriate to such circumstances. As we noted, his speaking style in press conferences is not exactly the same as in more informal contexts such as rallies or social media, but all its core characteristics remain. This study has repeatedly highlighted how Trump's spontaneous discourse contributes to his image as relaxed and self-confident, but also authentic, congenial and 'normal'. His language in press conferences appears simpler, vaguer and more informal than that of other politicians, thus distancing itself from what is considered to be the norm. At the same time, it may well be perceived as more direct, more spontaneous and more in line with the language that average speakers employ in everyday conversation. This is a linguistic approach that bolsters Trump's image as an outsider and bestows credibility on his pledge to sympathise with the people rather than the élite. Hence, Trump's political promise is not only reflected in his ideas and actions, but also – and perhaps in the first place – in his language, the means of persuasion which allowed him to get this far.

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