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Pragmatics in Contested Interpretation

Varied Audiences,
Varied Implicatures,
Varied Inferences

Samuel Bourgeois
Derek Bousfield

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Samuel Bourgeois
School of English
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester, UK

Derek Bousfield
Manchester Centre for Research
in Linguistics
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester, UK



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PREFACE

We are delighted to present this book which represents the culmination of our work and efforts in the field of ‘pragmacognitive’ research, analysis, and theorising around aligning understandings of speaker meaning-making and hearer interpretation and understanding. Our aim has been to provide the basis and the rationale for an original and provocative approach to thinking about and engaging in pragmatics.

While we have strived to offer a thorough thesis and original insights, we are acutely aware that this work builds upon the contributions of many esteemed colleagues and predecessors. Their foundational research and ongoing dialogue and contributions to the field of pragmatics and allied disciplines have been instrumental in shaping our understanding and approach, especially where we have critiqued and challenged such contributions.

We hope that the chapters that follow offer valuable perspectives and stimulate further discussion and research. Each chapter has been carefully structured to present key concepts clearly and to support them with empirical evidence and/or logical argument. We have also sought to highlight and position centrally to our discussion both the social context and the contemporary issues which impact on participant interpretation and understanding of what was said in determining what was meant, and what was understood, thus providing a balanced view of the field.

It is our sincere hope that this book will serve as a useful tool and a necessary stimulus for reasons which should become increasingly apparent

as each chapter is read and engaged with. We are grateful for the support and encouragement we have received from our peers throughout this journey. Any shortcomings in this work are entirely our own, of course; and while we recognise that our approach and focus is likely to stimulate emotive responses in certain sections of society, in the same spirit of freedom of expression through which we have produced this work we welcome constructive feedback and critique from our readers.

Thank you for your interest in our work. We look forward to the continued advancement of knowledge in the field of pragmatics.

Manchester, UK
January 2025

Dr. Derek Bousfield
Dr. Samuel Bourgeois

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Foremost is the invaluable support of **The Swiss National Science Foundation Postdoc.Mobility Grant (P500PH_210773)**, without which Sam would not have been able to work alongside Derek for a year on this and other projects. For this we are immensely grateful, and we here explicitly acknowledge the significant contributions to society that the investment that such funding makes in terms of research and understanding. We are also grateful to The Pew Center for their kind permission to use graphs they produced, which we do under section 1.4.

Special thanks to our colleague Caitlin Halfacre for her assistance on the corpus work on the varied semantic meanings of “bloodbath” and “bullseye” which we discuss in detail and at length in Chapter 5. Any infelicities which remain are of course our own. We are also grateful to Cathy Scott and Shreenidhi Natarajan from Palgrave who supported our project, and helped it move forward from outline concept to the completed text you read at this time.

We would also like to thank our families. Sam thanks Kathrin and Logan for their unending patience and understanding. To mom, thanks for always pushing me to pursue my interests and to Dad, I am eternally grateful for your support during the last leg of the Postdoc. Derek thanks Dawn, Tegan, and Darci for their endless patience, support, love, humour, occasional but always hilarious sarcastic banter, and boundless encouragement. Thanks guys!

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics Approval Full ethical approval was granted for work completed in relation to this piece.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Samuel Bourgeois was a postdoctoral research fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University and a recipient of the SNSF Postdoc.Mobility grant award (P500PH_210773) at the time of writing this book. He is now a lecturer at the University of Neuchâtel. His main research interests include pragmatics with a focus on (im)politeness studies focusing primarily on political rhetoric and entertaining impoliteness. He has multiple articles that are forthcoming, under review, or in press that focus on contemporary American political rhetoric including: *On the Conventionalization of Impoliteness formulae: The case of Trump's 'fake news' insult* (in press) and “Just saying it like it is”: *A comparative study on the characterizations of Chris Christie and Donald Trump as 'tough-guy' politicians* (in press).

He received his MA and Ph.D. in English Linguistics at the University of Neuchâtel in 2015 and 2020, respectively. From 2020 to 2023, he was a teaching fellow at the University of Neuchâtel and the University of Lausanne. During this time, he published articles focusing on journalistic prose (“*Oh yeah, one more thing: It's gonna be huge.*”: *On the use of oh yeah in journalistic writing* Bourgeois, 2022) and diasystematic discourse marker use among bilinguals (“*Ok, qui d'autre na, nobody on the line right now?*”: *A Diasystematic Construction Grammar approach to discourse markers in bilingual Cajun speech*, 2021). He has also published a co-authored paper on constructional change with

Prof. Martin Hilpert (*Intersubjectification in constructional change: From confrontation to solidarity in the sarcastic much? construction*, 2020).

Dr. Derek Bousfield is a Reader in Pragmatics and Communication, and the Doctoral College Faculty Head for Arts and Humanities (2025–present). He is the former head of the department of *Languages, Information, and Communications* at Manchester Metropolitan University (2013–2023). It was during his headship that he founded and developed the Linguistics (2014) and the Journalism (2015) subject areas, redeveloped The Language Centre (2015), developed the iSchool (2016), and co-founded the Manchester Centre for Research in Linguistics (2019) which he co-directed (2019–2025) with his colleague Dr. Khawla Badwan.

He teaches and conducts research in Stylistics, Critical Pragmatics, Interactional Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and Critical Discourse Analysis, within which subjects he has authored over 20 academic books and papers. He authored the world's first monograph on linguistically communicated aggression, conflict, and offence, which is entitled *Impoliteness in Interaction* (John Benjamins, 2008). He co-authored, (with Dr Stella Bullo) *Talking in Clichés: The Use of Stock Phrases in Discourse and Communication* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). He is co-authoring the world's first monograph on a linguistic approach to gaslighting, entitled *Gaslighting: Using Language in Coercion and Control* (with Dr Lunan-Taylor, for Cambridge University Press, due 2026). He also co-edited (with Professor Miriam Locher University of Basel) a book entitled *Impoliteness in Language* (Mouton de Gruyter, 2008) and the first special edition of an international journal on impoliteness, rudeness, and aggression (with Professor Jonathan Culpeper, Lancaster University) in the *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture* (2008); a journal he went on to serve as an editor (2009–2013).

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Pragmatics and Its Limits

Abstract This chapter examines the limitations of early speaker-based and subsequent hearer-based theories of interpretation, particularly in handling ambiguous language within polarised socio-political contexts. Specifically, this chapter critiques Rosenblatt’s Reader Response Theory, Grice’s model of implicature, and Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory for their insufficient treatment of ambiguity and contextual variability. It argues that reality paradigms and schemata, moulded by individual and group identities, are crucial in driving interpretive differences. Proposing a ‘pragmacognitive’ approach, being one that merges pragmatics with cognitive processes, the chapter offers a framework to analyse how identity-driven cognitive structures influence meaning-making in contentious socio-political discourse, laying the groundwork for further exploration of these dynamics.

Keywords Pragmatics · Context · Ambiguity · Interpretation · Reality paradigms · Political discourse

1.1 THE ROLE OF PRAGMATICS: CONTEXT CONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is a fickle beast. Linguists for a considerable amount of time have considered the meanings that speakers attempt to co-construct with their interlocutors to be mainly based on the linguistic resources available to such speakers (and likely to be shared and understood by the hearers) and the language forms they choose to use in the context in which they are offered. The default assumption being that the interpretation that the average listener or the ‘model person’ (Brown and Levinson 1987) would make is probabilistically that (or at least approximating that) which the speaker was intending or otherwise aiming for with their language choices. Most studies of pragmatics have been explicitly or implicitly predicated on this assumption. While it is undoubtedly true that most persons will at least subconsciously choose their words carefully in the context in which they understand they are being used, doing so for specific extra-linguistic and linguistic aims and goals, the issue with this is that it is an incomplete understanding at best, and is, perhaps, linguistically and interactionally naive at worst. Most people are not the ‘model person’ sometimes theorised (Brown and Levinson 1987—admittedly a point they acknowledged). Further, language is imprecise and people are complex and, like the interpretations we make, are fickle in many respects of their lives including how they choose to orient to or are otherwise oriented by the words they receive and the meanings they therefore take from them, especially where the language—as it often is—is imprecise to the point of being ambivalent and hence open to variability in interpretation. This, in essence, is what our book is about.

Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) opines that an interlocutor’s subjective experiences, emotions, and the cultural context in which they receive information can all play a part in their understanding of, and response to linguistic stimuli. Rosenblatt’s work was followed by Bleich (1978), Holland (1975), Fish, (1980), and Culler (1982, 2015) who similarly argued for what ultimately came to be known as a ‘reader response’, (or for our purposes here in dealing with interpretation within a model of pragmatics, a ‘receiver response’), in which the receiver’s personal experiences, emotions, and cultural background inform the interpretations made. This clearly does not preclude the possibility of projecting an origo or putting oneself in the position of another receiver. Arguably, this is what skilled speakers or authors do when carefully crafting the words they

wish to use in any communication. They anticipate how their words are likely to be taken based on a series of assumptions (of the type of person(s) they are talking to, and how similar comments have landed in the past, and so on). However, in short, it is fair to argue that while our understandings of the world and everyone's role in it may overlap, or at least be relatively well appreciated—at least enough so skilled speakers or authors are able to make predictions as to how their words might be taken—such understandings of the world are however neither (a) shared completely by all interlocutors, nor (b) guaranteed to be accurate, even where the recipients share the same sense of social reality. Indeed, we would argue that most studies of pragmatics to date fail to more fully engage with the very real, and all too common *variability in interpretation* that can come from contentious statements, contentious speakers, or variability in receiver response. Within this book then we explore the ways and mechanisms by which different audiences hearing the same comments made by the same speaker in the same context come to different interpretations as to the meanings behind them. One major criticism of Reader Response Theory that we introduced above is that it often overlooks, ignores, or downplays the cultural and social context in which a text is produced and received (see Fish 1980 and Tompkins 1980, for example). This approach can result in a narrow focus on individual responses that potentially overlooks larger societal factors which may well also be at play. We feel this is a critical limitation, especially for a study such as this one, as we argue below.

Therefore, in response to the insights we can glean from Reader Response Theory, and cognisant of its key limitations, we are particularly interested in exploring the role and construction of context in a socio-pragmatic analysis of controversial and varyingly interpreted comments made by (at the time of writing) Donald J. Trump, the former 45th and, latterly, the 47th President of the United States, and by Joe Biden, the 46th President of the United States. More specifically, in pursuit of a pragmatic model of meaning-making and communication that accounts for receiver interpretation and response, we analyse the contested interpretations of two controversial statements made by Trump during political rallies. The first controversy comes from the 2020 presidential election and concerns his *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19. The second controversy comes from the 2024 presidential election and concerns his use of the noun *bloodbath* when discussing his aspirations for the presidency and

the apparent implications for the auto industry and/or the country should he not be re-elected in the then following November 2024 election.

Along similar lines, we also analyse a controversial comment made by Joe Biden during the 2024 presidential election in which he said that it was, in his opinion, “time to put Trump in a bullseye”. This was a comment that he uttered during a private meeting with Democratic donors towards the end of his re-election bid for the 2024 presidential race; a comment which preceded an apparent assassination attempt of Trump by only five days. Utilising pragmatic approaches to understanding language behaviour, we investigate how these comments have been evidently interpreted by those receiving their words within the wider social and political context of a highly politicised and divisive political election campaign. As such, we are interested in exploring and expounding upon the sociopragmatic and cognitive pragmatic understandings as to why two or more people hearing the same comment by the same person with the same intonation in the apparent same context of utterance can ultimately come to different conclusions and interpretations as to the bundle of meanings that can be understood from what was said. Here we are exploring less the individual responses as per Reader Response Theory and concentrating primarily on the wider cognitive aspects that the social and political context in which such utterances were made, received, and interpreted contribute to understanding. Following Su (2020) and González Pueyo and Redrado Lacarta (2003), we therefore adopt the term ‘pragmacognitive’ to refer to the intersection of pragmatics (which we take to be the study of language in social use and context) and cognitive processes (which we take to be how we understand and process language). We further consider that the term ‘pragmacognitive’ is useful in considering how cognitive factors and processes influence both pragmatic use and interpretation; exploring, in effect, how we socially as well as interactionally (co-)create and interpret meaning in different contexts based on our mental processes, and in doing so, how these can give rise to contested interpretations across linguistic interpretants and cognitive interpreters.

Such cases of contested interpretations can occur virtually anywhere but are particularly apparent in cases where ambiguous language is used to simultaneously conduct face-attack against individuals and official organisations and appeal to a base of supporters in the context of political discourse. The use of such ‘strategically ambivalent’ language

(see Archer 2011a, 2015) is useful to Trump because it is heavily foregrounded and therefore is useful in generating (apparently intentionally humorous) jocular mockery or even ridicule that address controversial/tabooed topics against supposed shared foes in ways that are also potentially plausibly deniable (see Haugh and Bousfield 2012). Biden on the other hand appears to use colloquial yet more restrained language. Nevertheless, his rhetoric has also been highly controversial throughout his presidency and his political career before his ascendancy. However, the case of Biden's rhetoric being received controversially appears to be more connected to the highly polarised environment than it is to his use of linguistic resources comprising indeterminate language charged with controversial/tabooed topics. Such is the wider pragmatics of their speaking situations, and such is one focus, therefore, of this book.

1.2 HITHERTO PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics has hitherto been widely understood to be the study of language in use between interactants in context. Context has long been a thorny issue to both explain and account for. This has resulted in 'context'—and 'pragmatics' more widely—being historically viewed and treated as a 'wastebasket' into which that which is "assumed to be unknowable" about language use in interaction and society was metaphorically thrown (see the discussion in Leech 1983). While this has greatly changed, with the recognition of what constitutes 'pragmatics' expanding in the decades since this observation was made and initially challenged, what we aim to do here beyond further innovating and expanding the explanatory reach of pragmatics, is also to begin in earnest a more comprehensive mapping of some of the wider elements within the thorny notion of 'context'. In the upcoming chapters, we address the aspects of context that are essential to understanding the ambiguous terminologies that we analyse in this book.

1.3 IMPLICATURE AND EXPLICATURE

Models of implicature (Grice 1975; Horn 2004) and explicature (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 176–182) have been focused upon developing and expanding models by which we can explain how what was said, and what was meant can (a) both be very different things in and of themselves and (b) be interpreted varyingly by the receivers of these messages. Indeed,

while the former point is well explored in the academic literature, issues pertaining to the latter point are perhaps less well explored or explained (though see Sperber and Wilson 1995—which we nevertheless problematise below). However, coming to terms with this is central to us answering our main concern of this book which is how can an utterance from the same speaker who is saying the same thing that is intoned in exactly the same way and in the same situational context for all to hear be interpreted differently by those receiving the utterance or message? Of course, the recognition of this sort of possible outcome is by no means new. In fact, it is precisely this question that gave rise to the move away from speaker-based models in studies of pragmatics and communication in the 1990s onwards towards more hearer-centric (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2006) and discursive models of interaction (see for example Eelen 2001).

The prototypical speaker-based model of making and communicating meaning far beyond what was said is typified by Grice (1975, 1989). Within his ‘Cooperative Principle’—which he later outlined as a model of linguistic cooperation rather than a social one (see the discussion in Bousfield 2008)—he outlined four underlying maxims or expectations that each interactant is assumed to have in terms of communication. These being the maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner. Very briefly, as the theory is already exceptionally well known and well critiqued, Grice (1975, 1989) suggested that interactants in any communicative event expect that what they will be told, and what they themselves are expected to say, will be:

- **Quality**—that which the speaker knows to be true or at least knows is not false.
- **Quantity**—that amount of information that is enough to understand the topic, flow, and direction of the conversation, and that they will not be told too much, nor too little.
- **Relation**—that the information shared with them will be relevant to the topic, flow, and direction of the conversation.
- **Manner**—that the information shared with them will be in an appropriate register, delivered in an appropriate manner, without using unnecessary words or overly complex utterances.

Of course, Grice (1975) knew that these maxims were not only possible to be broken in interaction but were *regularly and consistently* broken in interaction for effect. There are numerous ways in which they can be broken, each with differing effects (see the fuller discussion in Bousfield 2008) on speaker meaning-making. For our purposes the main way in which a ‘conversational implicature’ is created and communicated—that is, the main way through which *meaning beyond what was strictly speaking said* is made—is through ‘flouting’. A *flout* is where the speaker breaks a maxim ostentatiously, that is obviously, for the interlocutors; it is designed to be noticed and understood for what it is—an invitation to infer additional meaning beyond what was said.

There are of course well identified issues and limitations with Grice’s otherwise simple and elegant approach to implicature and inferencing. The first is that the vagueness of the maxims is a major issue. What is a relevant topic of conversation to one interlocutor may well be an irrelevant or questionably relevant one to another interlocutor. What is an appropriate amount of information for one interlocutor can be too much or too little for another. Additionally, a speaker might believe or at least present themselves as believing what they are saying to be true, but we have no way of knowing, linguistically, if something is true (just whether it is presented as being true), and so on. The second but arguably most crucial of the (many) criticisms of Grice rests with the fact it is not only entirely speaker-based, but also it is entirely devoid of discussion or even consideration of what the hearer or other receiver ‘does’ with the implicature once heard in terms of interpretation and understanding. In short, Grice (1989) says effectively nothing about the socially situated cognitive processes that interlocutors engage in when implicatures are being formed.

Sperber and Wilson (1995), in extemporising around their theory of ‘relevance’ unashamedly developed it as a framework for understanding and interpreting utterances, framing it as a corrective to (some of) the limitations of Grice’s speaker-oriented model above. There are a few key concepts of Relevance Theory which are significant for our argument and analysis, summarised here from Wilson and Sperber (2006) but punctuated with our own comments and observations. This is presented below where we critique the model and its efficacy for our study:

Cognitive Principle of Relevance: This principle states that human cognition is designed to be geared towards the maximisation of relevance. In other words, according to Relevance Theory, our minds are constantly

seeking information that is most relevant to us, meaning it provides the greatest cognitive benefit for the least cognitive effort. As such, when we hear and take account of what another says to us, our minds seek the information we are to take from this based on—we might argue—pre-existing cognitive biases that we may hold. Hearers who are pro- or anti-Trump or pro- or anti-Biden may well then expect to take different meanings away from ambiguous statements or comments (see discussion in Chapters 4 and 5, though also see the discussion in Sect. 1.4).

Communicative Principle of Relevance: This principle, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995) and Wilson and Sperber (2006), posits that every act of communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. When someone communicates, they are implicitly suggesting that their message is worth the listener’s attention and effort to process. While this may well be questioned in some types of interaction and discourse, in terms of political discourse, this is perhaps more self-evident than in others.

Ostensive-Inferential Communication: Relevance Theory (2006) emphasises the importance of ostensive-inferential communication, where the speaker provides evidence of their intention to communicate, and the listener infers the intended meaning. This process involves two layers:

- **Ostension:** The act of making one’s communicative intention clear, such as through gestures, tone of voice, or explicit statements. Though what is “clear” communicatively for one set of people may well be unclear or even in dispute for another set of people.

On ‘ostension’ we should compare the differences in interpretation of the Elon Musk ‘gesture controversy’ surrounding his gesture on 20 January 2025. Here pro-Musk/pro-Trump supporters appeared to interpret the gesture that Elon Musk gave as “my heart goes out to you all”, and hence they apparently interpreted it as a gesture of political solidarity and affiliation; whereas a larger number of non-supporters saw the gesture, intertextually, as akin to a Nazi salute, fearing and opining that this was a thinly coded message as to the new government’s intentions moving forwards from this date.

- **Inference:** The listener’s process of interpreting the speaker’s intention based on the ostensive cues provided. Though, of course, what

ostensive cues are noted or considered as “ostensive cues” will, of course, differ from person to person, based on the factors we explore in more detail, below.

Context and Cognitive Effects: Wilson and Sperber (2006) highlight the role of context in communication, as do we below in detail. Context, in this model refers to the set of assumptions and background knowledge that the listener brings to the interpretation of a message. ‘Cognitive effects’ are the changes in the listener’s mental state resulting from processing the message. As an aside, we would question precisely what these ‘changes’ are and whether for all interactants a change even takes place. For Wilson and Sperber (2006), a message is considered relevant if it produces significant cognitive effects, such as new information, strengthened beliefs, or resolved ambiguities. They do not make a claim here about ‘changes’ being equivalent to apparently confirming already held beliefs (where comments, through *confirmation bias*, confirm what a hearer knows or thinks/considers that they already know to be true), however.

Explicature and Implicature: Relevance Theory distinguishes between explicature and implicature:

- **Explicature:** The explicit content of a message, which includes both the literal meaning and any additional information needed to make the message fully explicit. As we note, below, critics of the model suggest ambiguity and ambivalence are not well served by Relevance Theory.
- **Implicature:** The implied meaning that goes beyond the explicit content. Implicatures are derived through inference, such inferences being based on the context and the presumption of relevance.

This model, then, is an approach which *prima facie* seems ideal for our study, here. However, while being a model steeped in the tradition of cognitive linguistics, it is almost entirely hearer-centric. Initially envisioned as a response to, and even a complement to/correction of Grice’s (1975, 1989) model of implicature, the model became a framework for accounting for the way in which meaning is understood and interpreted in its own right. The concept of relevance comes from the observation and argument from Grice (1989) that “...an essential feature of most human

communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions” (Grice 1989: Essays 1–7, 14, 18, as cited in Wilson and Sperber 2006: 606). Grice’s (1989) view here was interpreted as a variant of the ‘communication is code’ model which has now been largely discounted by linguists. Wilson and Sperber (2006) continue with their explanation and their critique of Grice, when they say:

According to the code model, a communicator encodes her intended message into a signal, which is decoded by the audience using an identical copy of the code. According to the [relevance theory] model, a communicator provides evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided. An utterance is, of course, a linguistically coded piece of evidence, so that verbal comprehension involves an element of decoding. However, the linguistic meaning recovered by decoding is just one of the inputs to a non-demonstrative inference process which yields an interpretation of the speaker’s meaning.
(Wilson and Sperber 2006: 606)

There are two points to be made here. First, the important point for our emerging argument for a pragmacognitive approach to understanding meaning-making and interpretation recognises that the intended message is more than just “one of the inputs” fuelling inferencing and hence interpretation of what was said. Secondly, Wilson and Sperber (2006) do not more fully explore this tantalising observation in their subsequent work, as we argue below. Rather, Wilson and Sperber were content with heralding a move to a *hearer-centric* model of inferencing, moving away from the existing speaker-centric encoding models of implicature. This move—to hearer-centric models—while perhaps understandable for the time in which they were working was not without issues and problems of its own, however. The issues which pertain most clearly to our study here are summarised as follows:

1. Hearer-centric models generate similar problems and issues to those in the earlier speaker-centric models. Where speaker meaning is replaced with hearer interpretation, then we give rise to the potential for wildly different and arguably non-plausible (or at least low plausibility) outcomes or interpretations which are potentially irrecoverable by the vast majority of the hearing audience given

their understanding of the type of interaction activity the speakers are engaged in, or aspects of wider context. This is perhaps best summarised by Levinson (1989: 460f) who argues that Relevance Theory cannot explain how we arrive at implicated premises via creative processes. What he means by this is that Relevance Theory is entirely context dependent but does not sufficiently explore or explain relevant or salient aspects of context. The issues here from this point include the following. (A) *generalised implicatures* or language use which comprises the use of conventionalised linguistic formulae (see Culpeper 2011; Bullo and Bousfield 2023) would not and could not, according to Levinson (1989: 465–469), be covered by Relevance Theoretical models for precisely the reason that Relevance Theory is *entirely* context dependent (and hence does not explain well such conventionalised linguistic formulae or generalised implicatures that carry their meaning across contexts). (B), and crucially for this book and our foci within it, Relevance Theory does not deal with ambiguity well at all. It *is* recognised that the interpretation of explicatures can be and often is subjective, as it relies on the receiver’s understanding of the context and of the communicative intent of the speaker, thus leading to variability in results and potential biases (see Carston and Hall 2017). However, no study of Relevance Theory to date has successfully accounted for the relevant elements of context in each situation and as such cannot fully account for *why* ambiguity occurs, this being an issue we seek to begin to address. Finally (C), and perhaps more pertinently for our purposes, we must acknowledge that context and understanding of its features are not shared or understood by all equally. This is inherent to Trump’s rhetorical style especially. He is notorious for going off-script and speaking off the cuff to the extent that his speeches lack the coherent messaging that is more commonly found among traditional centre-right and centre-left professional politicians, such as Biden. We begin to explore this in more depth, below, in our discussion of ‘reality paradigms’ (Archer 2002, 2011b).

2. Additionally, Sperber and Wilson’s model relies on the distinction between lexical knowledge on the one hand, and general, or encyclopaedic knowledge on the other. As Kandolf (1993) argues, assuming a clear distinction between a person’s mental lexicon, and their encyclopaedic knowledge is both philosophically and practically problematic as this distinction is difficult to define and maintain.

This despite the fact that she (Kandolf 1993) argues that the ability to separate the mental lexicon and the grammar from the cognitively held general encyclopaedic knowledge is neither mature nor identical in every person's mind. Kandolf (1993: 40) effectively argues that lexical knowledge and encyclopaedic knowledge are different; and, as such, the contextualised knowledge (entailed in schematically held encyclopaedic knowledge) allows us the ability to "fill in the gaps" left by the application of lexical knowledge alone, which only provides denotational or at best foundational knowledge of the text. In the case of receivers however, it is less likely that they will make a distinction between the words said (their lexical knowledge) and the encyclopaedic knowledge they bring to bear (relating to, among other things, the context in which the words are said) at the point they come to an interpretation of what was said. Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory notes what is most relevant to the recipient is what is most *salient* (most prominent and most important to an interlocutor in a given context) and most *manifest* (what is the most mentally representable and accepted as true or probably true by the interactant). There are many issues with this otherwise elegant approach to relevance. What is *salient* and what is *manifest* to one recipient, may well not be *manifest* and *salient* to another. Taken to a logical end point, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory does not do well on accounting for interpreting in instances of ambivalence for either (i) the interlocutors, especially where there are multiple addressees with differing opinion, or (ii) the researcher. After all, in cases of the interpretation of ambivalence, Sperber and Wilson's model suggests that the recipient/hearer will weigh possible interpretations and select the one that provides the greatest cognitive effect with the least processing effort. This would imply that multiple meanings occurred to or were accessible by all the interlocutors. However, as we argue and demonstrate below, this does not appear to be the case in instances of members of the public interpreting Trump's and Biden's contentious and ambivalent comments when on the campaign trail.

3. Discursivity, and discursive models of linguistic and interactional behaviour while useful as a line of theoretical reasoning to avoid overt and dominant researcher bias (see Eelen 2001; Locher 2004) on the interpretation and analysis of data, fundamentally devours itself like a proverbial *ouroboros*. One issue is that the promise

of avoiding overt and dominant researcher bias is never really met. Discursive approaches—and the discursivists who propound them themselves—rely heavily on interpretation and there is no real understanding as to how these interpretations may vary across interactants or come into being. As such, there can be significant variability in how different researchers or analysts interpret the same data from discursivist perspectives. This can lead to inconsistencies in the interpretations (making the approaches adopted nonrepliable) and can inadvertently show researcher bias. To (partially) combat this, proponents of the discursive model insist that only speakers or interactants within any specific ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) have rights to say what any given utterance “meant” or how it was taken as (see Locher and Watts 2008). This approach however, which was oft repeated in late 1990s and early 2000s research in pragmatics, fundamentally and effectively considers communities of practice to be isolated islands of communication with no means of intertextual reference or schema portability to or from concepts or practices outside of the specific community of practice being scrutinised. This, of course, is entirely nonsensical from an intertextual point of view and a schema theoretical point of view (or even from the point of view of Lave and Wenger’s communities of practice model itself). After all, we do not live and operate in *single* communities of practice, alone. Each person in a free society typically operates in many different communities of practice daily and, given how schemata work, we humans are able to understand situations, meanings, and concepts in one community of practice by reference to another schema which is similar and within which we have some experience, and which can be from another community of practice or even another ‘activity type’ (see discussion of activity types in Chapter 2). To assume that practice from one community of practice would not and could not bleed through and impact on others (including in how meaning is understood and negotiated in different communities of practice) is naivety in the extreme. The relevance of this point is clearer where we present the analysis (see Chapters 4 and 5), but suffice it to say, here, that the notion that only members of a specific community of practice, a specific activity type, or a specific speech event can have a say on how the words have what meaning, is not only naive, but flies in the face of social and even legal practice. After all, it is all well and good making the

claim that only members of a specific community of practice, or activity type are permitted to assess what was meant by what was said, but doing so simply ignores the fact we humans do, by and large, make assessments and judgements on speaker meaning and intent even when we hear partial, after the event reportage of what people have said. Indeed, this is precisely what this book is (partially) about. Moreover, if we were to take such a claim to heart, communication among diverse communities would be highly problematic. Determining the meaning of any communication, particularly indeterminate phrases, would then become so challenging that reaching a consensus of understanding on any matter or situation would be nearly impossible. However, as regular experience in real world situations show, people from different individual communities of practice—including people from different nations with some significant differences in discourse practices such as the United States and the UK—are typically able to successfully communicate with one another and navigate areas of miscommunications with relative ease (though see point 4 in this list, below). The evidence that non-immediate participants can and do make judgements is clear in the social media data which we draw upon to demonstrate how after-the-fact participants and contributors to a speaking event interpret or at least infer meaning. Slutskiy (2024) suggests that human behaviour is rooted in, and even *requires* subjective interpretation, meaning that people often infer meaning and intent based on (their understanding of) context, cultural norms, and their own experiences. A consideration of Archer (2005, 2020) might also conclude that people's perspectives on reality would also play a role alongside these factors suggested by Slutskiy (2024). Further, Drożdżowicz (2018) argues that interactants make intuitive judgements about the meaning of utterances, which includes making such judgements even when the speaker is not present at the point of interpretation. She (2018) further argues that such judgements are based on the context and the way the utterance is delivered, according to the interpreter. This is an important point in our argument for the interpretation of (strategically) ambivalent utterances that we make in Chapters 4 and 5. Furthermore, even if present, from a philosophical perspective, Sanchez Curry (2021) argues convincingly for the impossibility of an ideal or canonical interpreter as explored by Byrne (1998)—a concept that Byrne introduced but

also critiqued. In short and for our purposes here, Byrne (1998) suggests that an ideal or ‘canonical’ interpreter is one who can understand and interpret another person’s beliefs and desires (which are at least partially signalled through their language behaviours, we might add), perfectly, and without error. As linguists, we might well be immediately moved to question this on the grounds of the imprecise nature of language and language use in interaction and context, and the apparent assumption of a ‘model’ person in interaction, a concept which in linguistics has been roundly critiqued and criticised. Eelen (2001) and Watts (2009) both noted that such beliefs as a model person, or an idealised interpreter, is based on assumptions of universal behaviours and rational, social reasoning. Watts argues that this may not (and we would argue *cannot*) hold true across cultures and contexts of interaction. Indeed, returning to philosophy, Poslajko (2020) argues that Byrne’s approach to interpretivism (being a way of understanding the world that focuses on how people makes sense of their experiences, a process in which reality is shaped by our interactions, language behaviours and resources, and culture) either (a) relies on an ideal interpreter—which, beyond the above, means interpretivism theorising becomes disconnected from how people actually think and behave because real people are not model persons and as such are not perfect and do not always interpret others’ beliefs and desires accurately, even if present in an interactive event; or (b) relies on the judgements of actual individuals, which suggests that these judgements are always correct, but in doing so interpretivist approaches denies the possibility of error, which Poslajko (2020) argues is unrealistic because people can and do make mistakes in interpreting others’ mental states. But herein is the rub, it is precisely in the “unrealistic” understanding of position (b) that—as our evidence shows—participants in interpreting ambivalent linguistics data we cover (see below) dwell.

4. Furthermore, discursive models are predicated upon a free-flowing assumption of more or less equal speaking rights for producers and receivers, with receivers (hearers) becoming producers (speakers) in turn. This is not always the case in all discourse types where in, say, political discourse, it is almost always predominantly a few people talking to the many, where ‘the man’ have limited rights or abilities

of (immediate, real-time) response or of claims to the same level of audience attention if they do respond relative to ‘the few’.

Within this book, then, beyond exploring the above, we ultimately explore some of the wider reasons for how and why different hearers or *audiences* come to differing interpretations and understandings of particular utterances, and we do so in order to develop a wider understanding of what is meant by *context* for interactants within any communicative event. Such phenomena are reminiscent of observations made by Thomas when discussing a speaker’s use of pragmatic ambivalence (2013 [1995]: 195) in which she stresses that both the speaker and the hearer(s) have a role to play in (co-)constructing the meaning of the pragmatic *force* in interactive situations. Thomas’s observations are particularly relevant to the situations that we explore in this discussion because the sort of discourses that she investigates involve situations where the speaker’s *illocutionary goal* is “perfectly obvious” (2013 [1995]: 195) while the speaker’s *pragmatic force* is not. This is quite the converse to what we observe in the data chosen for scrutiny and analysis in this present study. Thomas offers a small collection of examples that highlight how speakers can use pragmatic ambivalence to side-step direct speech acts (particularly *requests, orders, complaints*, and similar). Though ambivalence is also discussed by other linguists—particularly when describing politeness models such as Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson’s strategies of off-record politeness (1987: 225)—Thomas demonstrates that there are roles for both the speaker and hearer in constructing the pragmatic force behind that utterance. In one of her examples that explains pragmatic ambivalence, Thomas (2013 [1995]: 195) gives the following example:

Restaurant customer to waiter:
“We ordered some beer”

In Thomas’ example, she argues that that illocutionary goal of the customer is obvious—i.e. the customer wants the waiter to bring the group the beer that they had ordered. However, in terms of the *pragmatic force*, Thomas argues that it could range “along the continuum of meaning from *reminder* to *complaint*” and that “it is for the hearer to decide how to interpret the force and how to react” (Thomas 2013 [1995]: 196, emphasis in original). This being said and understood, the fact that the continuum is limited in scope of ‘speech acts’ (from

reminder to complaint), means it would be challenging for the hearer to decide to interpret the force as, say, a *compliment*, in such a situational context. As such, it should be apparent that both the speaker's choice of words and the hearer's cognitive scope for interpretation both have an equally strong role to play in interpretation. As such, we see our approach to be an independent complement, rather than an enhancing adjunct to Relevance Theory. That is, our model can be allied to it but is not dependent on it as an approach to accounting for *meaning-making* and *meaning-taking*. Hence our focus on a pragmaticognitive understanding of contested interpretations.

1.4 REALITY PARADIGMS AND SCHEMA THEORY

In acknowledgement of the observation that different people can hear the same utterance from the same person that is intoned in the same way and come to different interpretations as to what was meant, we find that Archer's (2011b) definition of *reality paradigms* to be highly useful and applicable. This is especially so when considering our data where the contested interpretations of what was said come from opposing groups along a political spectrum. Archer's definition of reality paradigms is as follows:

[...] the truth filters interlocutors use to interpret/make sense of their worlds. They are thus more specific to the individual than expectation frames... [rather], they tend to overlap with or feed into representational frames, that is, the way(s) in which interlocutors opt to "represent the character traits, ideas and opinions of and even statements made by others" (Locher and Watts 2008: 99, n9).
(Archer 2011b: 75)

Within these perspectives we argue that there is a collection of schemata (e.g. Werth 1999), which together form the reality paradigms of the individual people in the different audiences involved. To explain: schemata are those 'bundles of knowledge' every human holds in their heads about how the world works (or how they think it works) in terms of everything from types of people (e.g. police officers, nurses, teachers, politicians) to specific individuals (e.g. Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Kamala Harris), from types of settings (in restaurants, shops, the gym) to specific outlets, from types of behaviour to specific situations. In effect then:

a schema is a cognitive framework or concept that helps organize and interpret information. Simply put, a schema describes patterns of thinking and behavior that people use to interpret the world (Cherry 2024: 1)

We all have multiple schemata, including (drawing from Cherry 2024 and Culpeper 2001):

- **Person Schema** (containing expectations regarding appearance, behaviour, personality, preferences)
- **Self Schema** (containing beliefs about self, how one perceives self, and how one assumes others perceive self as well as idealisations of future self, or expectations of future self)
- **Event Schema** (containing expectations about behaviours, manners, traits, appearances, scripts of anticipated activities)
- **Social Schema** (containing expected dialogue options and topics for conversation, behaviours, appearance, and dress, financial expectations, and similar)

From the lens of psychology studies, the concept of a schema was initially developed by Bartlett (1995 [1932]) within his learning theory that suggested that our understanding of the world is formed by a network of abstract mental structures. However, it was Piaget who first coined the term ‘schema’ for his psychological studies in child cognitive development. Piaget (1952) argues that schemas are both a category of knowledge and tools used in the process of acquiring that knowledge. Moreover, he argues that they are fundamental building blocks of cognitive development in that they are constantly being created, modified, and reorganised as we interact with the world. In this line of research, it is found that schemata are modified and reorganised via *assimilation* in which new information is incorporated into pre-existing schemas and *accommodation* in which existing schemata are altered, or new schemata are formed as a person gains new information from life experiences.

However, more recent studies in psychology have added to Piaget’s observations about child cognitive development by highlighting that while schemata are relatively open to change in childhood, they become increasingly rigid and difficult to modify in adulthood (Padesky 1994). This can lead to adult-formed schemata persisting in individuals or even communities, even in cases where contradicting evidence is available. In

fact, Cherry (2024: 4) goes on to state that “in many cases, people will only begin to slowly change their schema when inundated with a continual barrage of evidence pointing to the need to modify it”. This latter point is one we pick up on below in our discussion of *identity* in and through language as part of reality paradigms and their operation in discourse and interaction.

Indeed, in terms of the *operations* of reality paradigms, we can explore and enhance the model offered by Archer (2005, 2011b, 2020) in order to more fully account for the types of discourse we scrutinise here in this book. In brief, Archer’s current model suggests that we can identify five component elements of reality paradigms’ operation in interactive communication:

1. Paradigm alignment or conflict between the addresser and addressee(s)
2. Facework (which we argue here is a route into, and reflection of (but distinct from) participants’ identities)
3. Pragmatic concepts and how they are interpreted by participants in context
4. Emotional Cues
5. Context awareness and sensitivity (of both the addresser and addressee)

However, in order to more fully exemplify how reality paradigms can align or come into conflict, we need to turn to a forerunner to Archer’s approach to reality paradigms, that of Ryan’s (1991) model of alternative possible worlds. Originally a model from Cultural Theory/Narrative Theory, Ryan’s (1991) model of alternative possible worlds has significant linguistic and interactional applications as well as explanatory power for reality paradigms.

1. In Ryan’s (1991) approach there is a concept known as the actual world (AW) which represents what is factually correct, demonstrably observable, and, socioculturally, what norms or structures/expectations are in effect in society (or should be “shared knowledge” in the form of culturally and socially shared schemata)
2. Within the AW there are various alternative possible worlds (APWs). These alternative possible worlds are in effect what McIntyre (2006)

called mental (we might here say “cognitive”) constructs of the participants in any situation. In effect, they are what participants think or believe are factually correct about the world in which they live; and what, socially, such participants think or believe are the norms and structures/expectations that are in effect (as evidenced by their behaviours including linguistic/interactional behaviours).

3. When individuals’ APWs align or at least overlap heavily, then harmony reigns (all other things being equal) and group identities form or are strengthened in terms of membership of and identifying with any given community/communities of practice (e.g. Where in each case membership of, and thus identifying with different *social factors*—for example, being Caucasian, being southern, being Christian, being Republican—represents both schematically expected behaviours and ways of being. As such we would argue that *social factors* are representative of core and component parts of any given community of practice).
4. When individuals’ APWs clash with other APWs, or with the AW, then this is where conflict can occur (as *face* is potentially threatened in disagreements/refusals to accept situations that pertain).
5. When individuals have formed close bonds within social groups with other individuals with (similarly) aligned APWs, this group becomes a close-knit part of their collective and individual identities. Any evidence/communication from others that positively reinforce their shared APWs are positively received and readily accepted/assimilated into the relevant schemata that make up their APWs. Any evidence/communication that contradicts their shared APWs are met differently depending on from whom they receive it. Should the evidence be presented by a supposed *other* from outside of the community of practice, this evidence is likely to be dismissed as biased and uncredible due to the supposed prejudices of the purveyor of the information (e.g. “the media is inherently anti-Conservative”, “Democrats are anti-X, Y, Z”, “Republicans are anti-X, Y, Z”, etc.). Moreover, such contradicting information from one of these supposedly hostile *others* has the potential to strengthen the rigidity of their reality paradigms as opposed to threaten them

because it gives them something/someone to fight against.¹ On the other hand, should the contradicting evidence/communication come from one of their own, this evidence has much more potential to be accommodated into the schemata that make up their APWs and more abstractly their reality paradigms. This evidence can be received in multiple ways ranging from hostility to acceptance.

American society has become increasingly polarised in recent decades (see Fig. 1.1). We argue that the social schemata held by different segments of the American population regarding civil society (i.e. the government, the community, etc.), members of political parties, and individual politicians can diverge significantly. As we show in Chapters 4 and 5, these schemata are not only stubbornly rigid but also contested, sometimes hotly. This contestation is based on one's adherence to and identification with certain social groups, such as political affiliation, local culture, and social class. In the following case studies, we would argue that Trump's rhetoric especially has become so omnipresent in American society since 2015 that his various audiences have by now pre-decided what *type* of speaker Trump is before the speech event even occurs. Therefore, where there are ambiguous or potentially multiple interpretations of an utterance, the one(s) that *fits* the pre-existing understanding of him is the one that his audiences select when hearing them. While Biden's rhetoric as president was not nearly as omnipresent and aggressive in the American political landscape, opinions on him and his rhetoric since his 2020 victory become similarly rigid and contested from the start. Therefore, reactions to his rhetoric since his ascension to the presidency followed similar paths of interpretation. The details of this argument are elaborated upon within the three case studies addressed in this book.

1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The remainder of this book is composed of Chapters 2–6. Chapter 2 focuses on the characteristics of typical American politics generally and relevant political communicative activity types specifically. Chapter 2 also explores the changes relating to the use of face-aggravating linguistic

¹ See Redlawsk (2002) for a discussion on how enthusiastic individuals receiving negative information about a preferred candidate can actually result in their support for them increasing further.

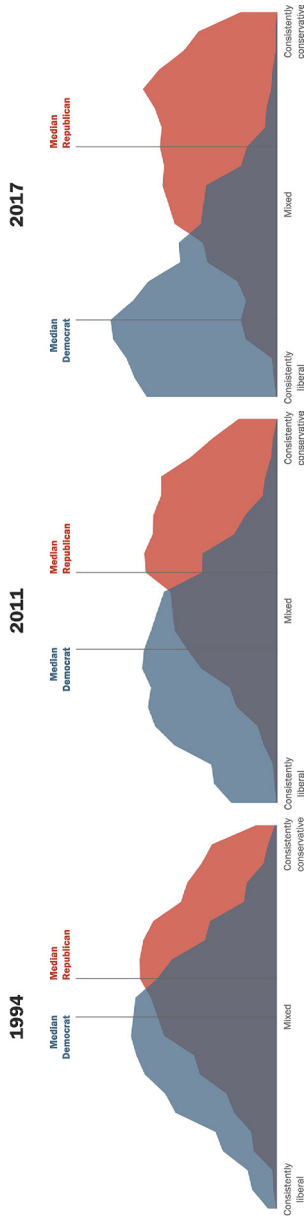


Fig. 1.1 Pew Research Center (2017) charts demonstrating the shift in the American public's political values since 1994

behaviours in American political communication over recent decades, though particularly since the 2016 election, which is seen as the start of the breaking down of the traditional norms of political linguistic behaviours that have been in place since the end of the Second World War. This chapter ends with descriptions of the presidential nominees for president in the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections: namely Donald Trump, Joseph Biden, and Kamala Harris who replaced Biden in the US presidential election after he withdrew from the race on 21 July 2024. We further explain here why we have chosen to conduct a comparative study of utterances by Trump and Biden that received contested interpretations only and not include any examples from Harris' campaign after she took over. Ultimately, this boils down to the fact that Trump and Biden share some discursive similarities involving talking 'off the cuff', while Harris does not show similar tendencies in her 'frontstage' rhetoric (see Goffman's 1959 distinction of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' contexts).

Chapter 3 provides an explanation of our rationale for selecting our data and the origins of the materials that we analyse. Moreover, it provides the contextual information on the political situations that are used as the basis for the analysis of the conflicting interpretations of indeterminate utterances made by different audiences. Finally, we give a full explanation of where and how we mined our social media data that provides us with reactions from the public to the three controversies under scrutiny. Specifically, we use the top 100 (liked) comments from YouTube videos which were posted by reputable news sources that show clips of the controversial utterances in question.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore our analyses of the data discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 concentrates on Trump's utterances of *kung flu* during the contentious 2020 presidential election. It begins with a summary of the events leading up to his initial utterance of *kung flu* at his Tulsa Rally on 20 June 2020 and then summarises the official responses and evaluations of this nickname by the audience at the rally, notable members of the press, the Democratic opposition, and fellow Republicans. The second part of Chapter 4 analyses how the YouTube commenting community evaluated Trump's *kung flu* nickname. The final section of Chapter 4 provides a discussion around the different interpretations and reactions to Trump's *kung flu* nickname and offers some final thoughts for future consideration.

Chapter 5 has a similar structure and aim as Chapter 4, except for the fact that it looks at two case studies coming from the similarly—if not more—contentious 2024 presidential election. It starts with the two-part case study involving Trump’s alleged *bloodbath* threat and then continues with a two-part case study investigation of Biden’s *bullseye* comment. Chapter 5 closes with a discussion of the results of these two case studies. However, we ultimately finish this section by comparing the similarities but especially the differences in the formulations of these two indeterminate and controversial phrases and the contexts in which they were delivered. Moreover, we end Chapter 5 by exploring what likely motivated the various audiences involved to interpret these utterances differently depending on their specific reality paradigms, identities, and belief systems.

In Chapter 6, we explore the larger ramifications of the contested interpretations of the controversial utterances coming from these two candidates for president—particularly in the context of an increasingly polarised American populace. This chapter begins by summarising the major findings of Chapters 4 and 5 before exploring how the reality paradigms of individuals and even groups are inherently tied to not only their notions of face but their essential notion of identity as well. We then expand upon this and discuss how much of what we observed in Chapters 4 and 5 can be partially explained by the influence of emotion and in interpreting information and decision-making generally and in political leanings especially. The final conclusions of this book are provided at the end of Chapter 6.

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CHAPTER 2

Reflections on Contemporary US Political Rhetoric and Our Data: With a Special Focus on Trump and Biden (2020–2024)

Abstract This chapter analyses the evolution of US political rhetoric from the late twentieth century to the present, focusing on shifts in norms across political activities such as rallies, debates, and interviews, particularly since Donald Trump’s political rise in 2016. It compares the rhetorical styles of Trump and Joe Biden, highlighting their distinct approaches to communication. Trump’s disruptive, celebrity-driven style is informal and combative, utilising humour and plausible deniability to engage supporters and attack opponents, often defying presidential norms of formality. Biden, a seasoned politician, employs a measured, value-driven rhetoric, though his bluntness occasionally results in controversial gaffes. These rhetorical profiles contextualise three controversies examined in Chapters 4 and 5, paving the way for further analysis in subsequent chapters. The chapter also justifies excluding Kamala Harris’ rhetoric from the 2024 election data, as her disciplined style lacks the ambiguity central to this study’s focus.

Keywords Political rhetoric · Donald Trump · Joe Biden · Ambiguity · Audiences

2.1 SOME CHANGES IN THE US POLITICAL LANDSCAPE SINCE THE 2016 ELECTION

Most public political activity types are argumentative and combative by design, as they revolve around politicians attempting to sell their proposals to potentially hostile audiences such as the press, political colleagues, and the public. In addition to acknowledging that “much political talk is designed for overhearing listeners even more than the actual party addressed”, Tracy (2017: 742) argues that one common strategy that politicians use to win the support of the public is to use “rudeness”. This value of rudeness or impoliteness in political exchanges has been observed by numerous scholars in recent years due especially to its association with *true* and *authentic* emotions that are frequently contrasted positively against cold and technical *politicalesque*, to which career politicians are associated (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009: 287).

Some of the most typical activity types in which presidential candidates engage include press conferences, formal interviews with journalists, and political rallies. Levinson (1992: 62) defines an activity type as “a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions” (emphasis in original). The notion of activity types is important to our approach of political rallies as well as private conference calls and is discussed in more detail in Sect. 2.3.1 as well as in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. Culpeper and McIntyre (2011) and McIntyre and Culpeper (2010) elaborate on Levinson’s (1992) notion of an activity type by arguing that an activity contains two dimensions: namely the *cognitive* and *interactional* dimensions. Regarding the cognitive dimension, they argue that “participants in any kind of communicative activity invoke particular schemas in order to make sense of the interaction” (McIntyre and Culpeper 2010: 205). On the other hand, the interactional dimension addresses how one accounts for the interactional characteristics of an activity type (i.e. the ‘participants’, ‘setting’, and the ‘allowable contributions’ mentioned in Levinson’s definition above 1992: 69). Drawing from Thomas’s work on activity types (2013 [1995]: 190–192), McIntyre and Culpeper (2010: 206) propose that any activity type’s interactional dimension should consist of the following list of the interactional elements:

- The goals of the participants

- Allowable contributions
- The degree to which Gricean maxims are adhered to or are suspended
- The degree to which interpersonal maxims (cf. Leech's Politeness Principle, 1983) are adhered to or are suspended
- Turn-taking and topic control
- The manipulation of pragmatic parameters (e.g. power, social distance)

While some of the above mentioned frontstage political activities such as press conferences (e.g. Clayman and Loeb 2018; Ekström and Eriksson 2018; Wodak et al. 2021) have received attention in recent publications, political rallies, political interviews, and other similar political events have received much less attention—particularly relating to how developments since 2016 have challenged the traditional political conventions that shaped how these events were run. While US presidential campaigns have existed since the ratification of the US Constitution in 1788, much of what we recognise as typical political campaign activities have evolved from the political campaign conventions the developed with the changes to the presidential candidate nomination systems of the two major US political parties from the second half of the twentieth century. It was during this period that the party nomination procedures for Democrats and Republicans shifted away from party conventions selecting presidential candidates, which was the norm from the 1830s to 1968, towards a process headed by individual state primaries, which has been the case from 1972 to today (Maisel 2007: Ch. 2). This also coincides with the increasing influence of the press in the political process thanks in large part to significant developments in radio, television, and social media technologies—all of which facilitate the recording and transmission of political events that are now critical to the election process. These changes in the presidential election process have also been linked to the increased importance of celebrity endorsements in presidential campaigns and the candidate's photogenic image and media skills that allow them to engage with an electorate that increasingly expects a certain level of "entertainment" from their leaders in addition to their political interests being met (see White and Kerbel 2022: Ch. 4).

The most recent outshoot of these developments is the rise of celebrity politicians, the most notable of whom is President Trump. Trump not only won a surprise upset election in 2016 but also successfully ran a

comeback re-election bid in 2024 after being defeated in 2020. The past three presidential elections involving Trump as a candidate have rocked the political order in multiple ways, particularly because he has managed to overwhelm and outperform multiple career politicians on both the Republican and Democrat sides of the aisle, apart from Joe Biden in 2020. The ascension of such a figure into the most senior position in the US federal government is significant for multiple reasons. This includes the following:

- Trump entered the 2016 race with absolutely no experience in politics.
- Trump has a decades-long history of problematic conduct including business scandals, sex scandals, accusations of ethnic prejudice and sexism, and other accusations of engaging socially disruptive behaviours (see Barret 2016; D’Antonio 2016; O’Brien 2016).

The significance of Trump’s rhetorical conduct and their consequences to the contemporary political order is explored further in Sect. 2.3.

2.2 REFLECTIONS ON TRUMP’S AND BIDEN’S RHETORICAL STYLES

To address the issues discussed in Chapter 1, this study concentrates primarily on three talk scandals (see Ekström and Johansson 2019) involving indeterminant language that received contested interpretations that took place over the presidential electoral campaigns of 2020 and 2024. The first utterance under investigation comes from a 2020 presidential campaign rally in which Trump uses a self-coined nickname for COVID-19 (i.e. *kung flu*) that received substantial criticism due to its apparently derogatory intertextual references to China and the Chinese people and culture. The second case involves the supposed threat made by Trump during the early months of the 2024 presidential campaign concerning the consequences (i.e. a bloodbath) that would ensue should he not be re-elected in 2024. The third controversial utterance that we analyse was made by President Biden a few days before the first assassination attempt made against Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania, on 13 July 2024. Biden is reported to have said that it was “time to put Trump

in a bullseye” during a private conference call meeting with top Democratic donors following his own weak performance in the first 2024 presidential election debate in late June. This comment was retroactively criticised by multiple Trump allies shortly after the assassination attempt against Trump, causing controversy and public debate as to whether this comment constituted incitement to violence. As is shown in Chapters 4 and 5, we find polarised and often highly emotional interpretations coming from different audiences in our analyses of all three of these controversies, with opposing interpretations often falling along political affiliations.

The polarised interpretations and the sociopragmatic reasons behind these differing understandings is therefore the focal point of this book. We achieve this first by addressing the context of the utterances themselves and then by focusing on the reactions from the press, prominent public figures, and people who responded to YouTube videos posted by mainstream news organisations that feature the utterances under investigation. To understand the contexts that surround these three controversial utterances, it is also essential to contextualise the backgrounds and rhetorical preferences of these two opposing figures. We begin by doing this in Sects. 2.3 and 2.4.

2.3 TRUMP’S EVOLVING RHETORICAL STYLES FROM THE 1970S TO TODAY

Trump started his career as a New York City real estate businessman in the 1970s when he took over his father’s business in 1971. Additionally, Trump became a reality television host in the exploitative competition programme, *The Apprentice*, from 2004 to 2015. Like his father before him, Donald Trump understood that the public media could be used as a cost-effective method to advertise one’s business (D’Antonio 2016). However, Trump took his father’s methods to the next level and used his many contacts in public media to not only keep his business ventures but also himself constantly under the spotlight. In fact, Trump—the businessman—was often compared to P.T. Barnum, a nineteenth-century businessman and showman who famously used PR as a tool of “bombastic” yet entertaining self-promotion (O’Brien 2016: 218). However, Trump’s exploitation of public media was not one-sided. The press and other forms of public media also benefited from reporting on and interviewing Trump because of his eccentric nature and tendency to say

bombastic, outrageous, and sometimes even outright offensive things. This eccentric nature made him a marketable subject in the business and gossip sections of the popular presses since the 1970s (Trump and Schwartz 1987; D’Antonio 2016; O’Brien 2016). Within Herman and Chomsky’s (2002: xi) Propaganda Model of twentieth and twenty-first-century mass media, they argue that American mass media “serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them”. One result of these pressures is the increasing prioritisation of entertainment news as well as a dependency on individuals such as Trump who are “the primary definers who both make the news and subsidize the media by providing accessible and cheap copy” (Herman and Chomsky 2002: xvii).¹ This mutually beneficial relationship continued for decades and arguably continues today because whether people love or hate him, news reports about Trump create a lot of hype and keep media consumers engaged. In fact, reports show a surge in cable news viewership during Trump’s rise to and tenure during his first term in office, which fell sharply after his departure in January 2021 (Nicolaou and Gilbert 2021).

This decades-long relationship between Trump and the media, along with his subsequent role as a celebrity in *The Apprentice* resulted in Trump becoming a major figure in American popular culture. Central features of his persona include his lavish wealth and lifestyle and his no-nonsense *tough guy* persona that is heavily linked to his identity as a New Yorker (O’Brien 2016: 14–15). This aspect of his persona was often received as quirky or even funny, though simultaneously many also considered these behaviours as vicious and cruel (D’Antonio 2016: 10). Moreover, Trump is also known to engage in brazen exaggeration in matters concerning self-promotion and the criticisms of supposed competitors and adversaries. In fact, he self-coined the term “truthful hyperbole” to explain his way of selling himself and sealing deals in his bestselling memoir/business advice book, *The Art of the Deal* (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 27). Though, as we noted above, he has frequently been compared to P.T. Barnum due to his gratuitous use of exaggeration and hyperbole, various biographers point out some key differences, particularly when it comes to his alleged bully-like behaviours. D’Antonio (2016: 10–11) elaborates on this by stating:

¹ This has gone by other names such as ‘infotainment’ (Lakoff 2005: 196; Mullany 2011).

Trump occasionally smiled in a way that made you think he understood he was being preposterous, but he lacked Barnum's sunny playfulness. He was often combative and sometimes mean. He sued or threatened to sue those who offended him, and he declared certain female critics unworthy because they were "grotesque" or "fat" or "ugly". [...] When questioned about this kind of behavior, Trump justified it like a boy in a fight, complaining that the other guy struck first.

Though the mainstream press subsequently developed a primarily adversarial relationship with Trump following his entrance into presidential politics, his previous decades of frequent coverage had arguably already manufactured an image of success and legitimacy for him as a leader in the eyes of a significant proportion of the American public.² It is precisely this 'tough guy boss/leader' persona coupled with his celebrity status that allowed him to enter the 2016 race advantageously despite having no previous political experience.³

Trump has continued to capitalise on his tough guy persona as a politician in a fashion that reinforces his pre-manufactured image as a strong and straight-talking leader who forgoes Washington, D.C. conventions and instead operates as an outsider reformer ready to "drain the swamp" of the US Federal Government (Wolff 2018). In his now infamous first political debate on 6 August 2015, Trump set the stage for what was to come as he defended his personal rhetorical style against the criticism that his history of making sexist comments against women and his overall lack of a "politician's filter" had some downsides:

Trump: I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. [APPLAUSE] I've been challenged by so many people, and I don't frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don't win anymore. We lose to China. We lose to Mexico both in trade and at

² By mainstream press, we mean most established news outlets that declare no explicit support for any ideology. This includes most media organisations outside of a steadily growing amount of cable and internet news sources such as Fox News, MSNBC, One America News Network (OAN), The Daily Caller, Breitbart News, etc.

³ However, it is notable that Trump considered running for president in 2000 as a Reform Party candidate before abandoning the idea before the race began. He also considered running as a Republican in 2012, though he also never officially entered any of the Republican primaries.

the border. We lose to everybody. And frankly, what I say, and oftentimes it's fun, it's kidding. We have a good time. What I say is what I say [...] (1st Republican Primary Debate, 6 August 2015)⁴

In this response, Trump does a variety of things rhetorically. Most obviously though, Trump sidesteps the main thrust of the criticism that he received concerning his history of making sexist comments towards women and instead addresses a separate issue. In this case, he reduces the issue to a discussion of “political correctness” which continues to be a controversial issue in the US today.⁵ Moreover, he argues that political correctness is causing political and economic loss in the United States, though how it is doing so is left unsaid and what this has to do with his confrontational and controversial idiolect is also left unexplained. In this response, Trump flouts a variety of Grice’s (1975) maxims including ‘relation’ (be relevant) and possibly even ‘quality’ (be truthful). Most notably, however, he is flouting ‘manner’ in which speakers are expected to be perspicuous by avoiding obscurity of expression and ambiguity and also be brief and orderly. Such argumentation implies that political correctness has a negative effect on the state of affairs in the United States. It also implies that the United States can only “win” again if it is abandoned.⁶

2.3.1 *Contemporary Political Rallies vs. Trump’s Political Rallies*

Since entering politics in 2015, Trump has engaged with the public through two activity types particularly that have since become quintessential elements of Trump’s political brand. These are (i) his political rallies and (ii) his communications via social media on Twitter (now X) and later his own social media platform, Truth Social that was launched in February 2022. In this study, we concentrate on controversial utterances made by Trump during political rallies. While these rallies were initially run as a campaigning activity during the 2016 election, Trump continued holding them throughout his first term in office and beyond, even outside of election years. At these rallies, Trump commonly speaks ‘off the cuff’ by using

⁴ The transcription for this debate has been made available on *The American Presidency Project* website: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-candidates-debate-cleveland-ohio>

⁵ Via the Strawman fallacy.

⁶ This is an example of the false dilemma fallacy.

controversial statements that are highlighted by the press and used as criticism fuel by his detractors. However, at the rallies themselves, Trump's controversial utterances are usually met with enthusiastic applause—due undoubtedly to the fact that the attendees of these rallies are typically his most hardcore supporters. These polarised reactions by the crowd at the rallies (i.e. the intended audience), the press (i.e. ancillary audience in attendance or via recordings), as well as consumers of the reporting/recording of the rallies (i.e. extended audiences) is the focal point of the analysis that follows in Chapters 4 and 5 (see Fig. 2.1).

In addition to understanding the different audiences involved in a political rally, it is also important to define the interactional dimension of a political rally activity type. Through the observation of multiple American presidential political rallies, the following conventional linguistic/pragmatic and schematic elements have been found to be characteristic of the presidential rally activity type:

- **Setting:** A public place with a stage and place for a large audience (auditorium, amphitheatre, or similar).
- **Participants:** One or multiple candidates, an audience, journalists/camera operators/boom operators, and similar.

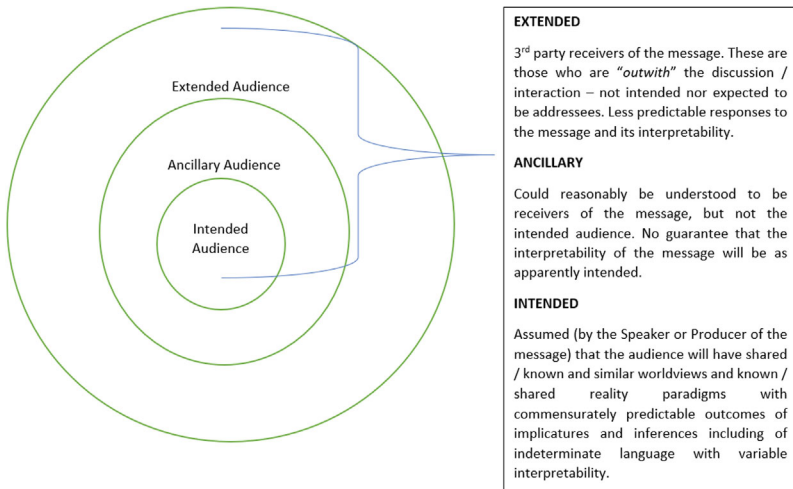


Fig. 2.1 Audiences/Addressee groupings

- **Goals:** (a) The purpose of a political rally is for the candidate/speaker to create or manufacture rapport and a shared/collective understanding of the important issues with the audience. (b) The audience attends the rally in hopes of either showing their support for a candidate and/or gaining knowledge about them. (c) Journalists are there to report on the event in a professional capacity.
- **Social parameters and norms of information exchange:** Asymmetrical power relations. The candidate stands in the focal point of the stage and usually possesses a microphone. The audience's role is primarily passive and is restricted to giving applause or sometimes being granted the floor to ask questions during Q&A sessions.
- **(Im)politeness norms:** *Modesty maxim* for the candidate is relaxed (cf. Leech's Politeness Principle 1983); Facework (positive and negative) expectations in relation to or towards other candidates (or individuals they are associated with) are weakened. In fact, criticism or other intentional face-attack is expected especially in relation to the comparison of the speaking candidate and his/her adversary. However, building rapport via positive politeness ('the desire to be approved of') is enhanced with the audience (see Brown and Levinson 1987; Bousfield 2008).
- **Possible discourse types:** Candidate: extended monologue speech; audience: cheering, clapping, short exclamations of approval, and sometimes questions during Q&A sessions.
- **Register:** A formal and professional register and formal business attire are the norm, except in specific cases where the targeted audience belongs to a specialised professional/social class.

Overall, Trump's political rallies adhered to the majority of the conventional elements of the American presidential political rally activity type with the exception of a few incongruities. The most notable incongruity includes a notably less formal spoken register that includes intense and regular use of gratuitous face-attack hurled at adversaries, most of whom are not present to defend themselves. While criticisms of elements of a competitors' professional abilities would be considered to be allowable contributions and even expected at a typical political rally, Trump pushed the boundaries of what was typically considered 'reasonable hostility' (Tracy 2008, 2017) much further and regularly focused his face-attacks against the more "face-laden components of the ego" (Culpeper

2011: 25) such as professional integrity, appearance, disability, and even ethnicity.

In fact, creating pejorative nicknames against his adversaries has become Trump's trademark rhetorical move. In an analysis using data Trump's Twitter profile from 2009 to 2018, Tyrkkö and Frisk (2020: 116) identified that Trump's nicknames fell into 5 distinctive nickname categories in terms of what aspect of his victim his nickname targets: *appearance*, *personality*, *intellect*, *behaviour*, and *reference*. Some of these nicknames were used more than others and some were used over longer periods of time depending on the amount of attention that they received from Trump over his political career (Tyrkkö and Frisk 2020:127). Despite his habits of insulting his adversaries, certain themes have generally been avoided by Trump. Tyrkkö and Frisk (2020: 123–124) note for instance that none of his nicknames directly referenced a person's sexual orientation in cases when they belonged to the LGBTQ + community. It is also notable that Trump has not used any standardised slurs against groups of people in public during his political career, despite claims that he allegedly uses them in private (Lopez 2020a).

However, while Trump has avoided using standardised slurs in his rhetoric, his nicknaming strategies have indeed targeted people's ethnicities on some occasions. Though ethnically charged nicknames were relatively rare in Trump's personal repertoire compared to those that address people's physical attributes/appearances (*Liddle Bob Corker*), personalities (*Low Energy Jeb Bush*), and professionalism (*Crooked Hillary*), he has coined a few notable examples of them over his political career. Examples include his nickname for Senator Elizabeth Warren (*Pocahontas*), his nickname for journalist Chris Cuomo (*Fredo*), and his supposed private nickname for a former competitor in the 2024 Republican primaries, Florida Governor Ron Desantis (*Meatball Ron*). These examples of Trump's ethnically charged nicknames above indeed make references to the ethnic backgrounds of their targets either through intertextual references to popular historical/fictional characters (*Pocahontas* and *Fredo*) or ethnic cuisine (*Meatball Ron*). These creative nicknames that attack his adversaries based on their ethnic backgrounds have thus far shielded Trump from being universally labelled a 'racist' in the United States and abroad, despite the accusations by many that such nicknames are equivalent to 'ethnic slurs'. For instance, the intertextual references and uniqueness of these nicknames allow for debate between those who argue that such nicknames are not 'racist' and those who argue that they are.

Despite these accusations, Trump vehemently denies being a racist and xenophobe—stating on multiple occasions with trademark hyperbole that he is the “least racist person in the world”.⁷

However, nicknames were only one method of attacking his supposed opponents. One additional method includes mimicry. One notable example of this involves Trump making fun of journalist Serge Kovaleski’s physical disability during a political rally on 25 November 2015. Trump later vehemently denied that he was ridiculing Kovaleski’s disability, though the video evidence suggests otherwise and casts serious doubt on this explanation (Carmon 2016). Coincidentally, it is precisely these aspects of ‘face’ (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987) that middle-class culture in English-speaking societies, including the United States, have deemed the most socially sanctioned targets of face-attack (e.g. Bousfield 2008: 38; Culpeper 2011: 43–46) with gratuitous attacks against ethnicity, disabilities, and families being judged by society generally as the most egregious (Culpeper 2019; Jay 2019).

2.3.2 *Trump’s Trademark Strategies in His Political Rhetoric*

Trump’s idiomatic use of language has received considerable attention since 2016. Within linguistics, there are two edited volumes dedicated to various aspects of his rhetoric (see Schneider and Eitelmann 2020, and McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020) as well as numerous other publications that address where his rhetoric fits along the political spectrum (see Stopfner 2021; Wodak et al. 2021). However, to our knowledge, the current literature has neglected to address how Trump skilfully uses indeterminacy/multifunctionality in his aggressive face-threatening utterances in public forums to provide himself with a shield of ‘plausible deniability’. Admittedly plausible deniability has been applied to Trump’s rhetorical strategies in earlier publications such as Hodges (2020: 137) who defines plausible deniability as “a common world-shaping feature of political discourse that allows speakers to avoid taking responsibility for a controversial utterance by invoking possible counter-interpretations”. These counter-interpretations rely on a “reactive reversal” strategy that narrows the focus of problematic utterances in question to the semantics

⁷ For one such example from 2019, see the following Associated Press video: https://youtu.be/7NfwoLfyBY8?si=NcpvZJH_rdx8J_xC

of individual words or phrases while also relying on a “grossly incomplete perspective on the interactional context” in order to minimise the problematic nature of one’s own words retroactively (Hodges 2020: 146). While Hodges sufficiently provides rich insights into how Trump retroactively attempts to avoid the consequences of certain problematic utterances, it falls short of sufficiently accommodating how many of Trump’s face-aggravating behaviours at rallies and online are wittily formulated to avoid social sanctions in the first place. For instance, the current literature has not satisfactorily accounted for the role that his informal creative/hyperbolic language has played in allowing him to avoid consequential social abandonment among the American public at large, nor can it account for why the interpretations and responses to his problematic utterances are so strongly contested among those that appreciate his language style and those that do not.

In fact, much of the verbally aggressive language that Trump uses in his political rhetoric is reminiscent of school yard *jocular abuse* (Haugh and Bousfield 2012) or even *humorous genuine impoliteness* (Dynel 2021). This is especially apparent at Trump’s rallies where he engages and builds affiliation with his audiences through banter-like discourse that verbally attacks their common foes (see discussion of *disaffiliative humour* in Dynel 2021: 27).

Archer’s (2011a, 2015) face aggravation scale (see Fig. 2.2), which was created to account for cross-examining lawyers in Anglo-American courtrooms, is a useful starting place for explaining the multifunctional relational implications for Trump’s face-threatening/attacking utterances and how they operate differently for his victims vs. his intended friendly audiences. This scale is particularly advantageous to our data involving Trump speaking at his rallies because it acknowledges that the potential for face threat/damage exists along a continuum as opposed to being rigidly categorical. Most importantly, Archer’s (2011a) model captures a level of facework that is positioned between Goffman’s (1967) *intentional* and *incidental* levels of face aggravation that is labelled the strategic ambivalence zone. This intermediary zone was created to more effectively deal with cases where face-threatening behaviours are multifunctional and not primarily concerned with vicious face-attack/impoliteness as such. Such a scalar understanding is useful when dealing with real-life data, as the distinguishing line between pure impoliteness and banter is often not clear-cut to co-locutors, on-lookers, nor even researchers.

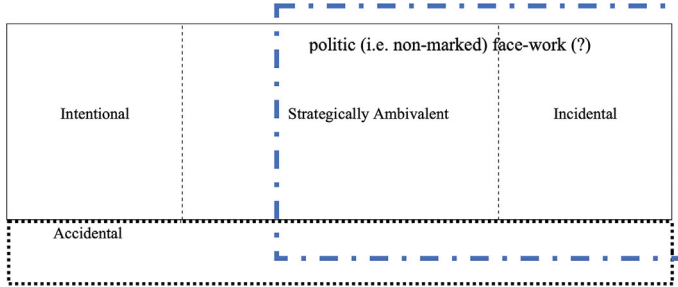


Fig. 2.2 Archer's (2011a, 2015) face aggravation scale

This scale is particularly applicable to Trump rhetoric because much of his aggressive behaviours artfully play with the limits of what is considered 'acceptable' in polite society. He does this through creatively formulated utterances that breach controversial topics without expressing it using standardised tabooed language. Such creatively unique methods of verbally attacking his adversaries, be they people or institutions, thus add elements of multifunctionality and thus ambivalence to his language. This is particularly evident in his dysphemistic nicknames for people, places, and institutions. We discuss the artfulness of these dysphemistic nicknames in detail in Chapter 4.

2.3.3 *Humour in Trump's Political Rhetoric*

The discussion surrounding Trump's rhetorical behaviours have demonstrated so far that aggressive and ridiculing jocular humour are among Trump's most talked about rhetorical strategies. Considering the importance that humour plays in Trump's controversial rhetoric, it is therefore necessary to explain how humour theory can aid us in our analysis of political rhetoric. Of the three main theories of humour—*psychological release*, *incongruity*, and *superiority* (see Billig 2005) that we discuss further in Chapter 4—Trump's humorously charged rhetoric leans towards the latter two especially. Concerning his expression of his superiority, Trump styled himself as an 'anti-establishment' candidate for the presidency and showed a willingness to consistently break the norms and expectations and of a traditional politician. Therefore, much of his humoristic digs against his foes are formulated to function in a way

that punch them down and/or lift him up. Incongruity is also certainly utilised in his generation of humour precisely because his behaviours at public events as well as online do consistently operate against the established norms and expectations what is considered standard presidential behaviours. Such blatant disregard for these conventions is therefore interpreted as humorous, though the extent to which different groups of people find him humorous certainly varies. Over the years, his refusal to adhere to the established presidential norms has become so normalised that it is now what people fully expect of him.

In addition to this, we argue that Trump's use of informal/creative impoliteness utterances mimics banter, jocular abuse, and genuine humorous insults (cf. Haugh and Bousfield 2012, Dynel 2021)—all of which work to 'sugar-coat' the intensity of his insults, camouflage any intention to aggravate the face(s) of his target(s), and even entertain his base of supporters via disaffiliative humour (Dynel 2013, 2021). Such a strategy is certainly at play with his nicknames for people mentioned above and the *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 that we analyse in detail in Chapter 4. Such strategies are central to the indeterminant multifunctionality of Trump's face-aggravating utterances that include in large part insults but also many other conventionalised and implicational impoliteness formulae (see Culpeper 2011: Chapters 4 and 5).

Indeed, using such comments and taking such an approach to describing his perceived geopolitical rivals and supposed adversaries in such stark and insulting terms constitutes both impoliteness and humour (i.e. entertaining impoliteness, see Culpeper 2011: 233–239). This can partially explain why many of Trump's aggressive behaviours are received—at least by large portions of his base and political supporters—as *jokes*. The use of *jokes* is a strategy of social cooperation that Brown and Levinson (1987) have identified as a potential politeness output strategy in their politeness model. They argued that humour was in fact a powerful positive face-oriented strategy for building or maintaining social bonds. However, nothing in their model describes the use of vicious disaffiliating humour against others, as we observe in Trump's front stage political activities.

Trump's witty nicknames, for instance, are clearly not polite towards the people or institutions that they target. However, what Brown and Levinson (1987) did not consider or anticipate is the third party or a wider audience of any speech event. Bousfield (2008, 2010) and Haugh and Bousfield (2012) effectively argue that it is possible for person A

and person B to bond over a shared joke which is at the expense of person C, who may or may not be in earshot. This means, it is possible for two or more people to “bond” over cruel jokes or insulting barbs directed at or about another. This would constitute cruel humour. The use of humour as a strategy for building or maintaining social bonds, of being a positive face-oriented enhancement in fact, is well covered in the Brown and Levinson (1987) model of social interaction, though not in the way just described. The fact is, assuming one is not the butt of the joke/humour, then it is easier to see how such comments (a) might be interpreted as humorous (as they are incongruent and arguably demonstrate superiority) and (b) can be seen as funny because they are aimed at someone else. Of course, this is not always the case—individuals can be and often are offended that some other individual or group to which they do not belong are the butt of a cruel joke or insulting barb by a third party, but—as we argue below—this is likely not the case with those who unproblematically align themselves and their identities with Trump’s (see Chapter 6). In effect, the logical extension of the use of insulting jokes effectively re-affirms Trump’s base’s connectivity and identity as members of a community of practice, while simultaneously *othering* those that do not support Trump, and who are hence *not* members of the community of practice. Ultimately, it is a further stitch in the fabric of the dichotomisation of American politics and arguably one of the reasons Trump is seen as a divisive figure. Furthermore, as a logical corollary of the superiority element mentioned above, it smacks of ‘American Exceptionalism’.

Looking at the face aggravation scale above, we argue that many of Trump’s utterances are indeed multifunctional and indeterminate about their primary (if there even is one) relational implications. However, as our data in Chapters 4 and 5 show, it is also evident that further updates to the face aggravation scale are required to accommodate for our observations of the political rally activity type and politicians like Trump specifically. In particular, it is evident that while Archer’s strategic ambivalence accommodates for utterances that attack face in a strategic but not in a ‘spiteful way’, many of Trump’s utterances appear to use ambiguity and multifunctionality in a way that is likely not only intentionally spiteful but also disguised as ambivalent for the self-protection purposes that include plausible deniability and setting up the targets of his face-aggravating utterances to appear ‘overly sensitive’ and/or ‘unable to take a joke’ should they reciprocate his impoliteness with tit-for-tat

pairings (see Culpeper and Tantucci 2021). Such strategies can be effective because such characterisations are often regarded as negative social attributes in many segments of Anglo societies (cf. Culpeper et al. 2017: 335), particularly among the male, working-class, and lower middle-class communities (Haugh and Bousfield 2012; Haugh 2017). Our adaptations to Archer’s face aggravation scale are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.4 BIDEN’S RHETORICAL STYLE

Unlike Trump, Biden is a career politician and was a US Senator from Delaware for most of his adult life. He was first elected to the Senate at age 30 in 1972 in an upset victory over Republican Senator James Caleb Bogg (the incumbent candidate) and was re-elected 6 times before he resigned from his post to become the vice president under President Barak Obama in January 2009. While Biden decided not to run for president in the 2016 election, he returned to politics in 2020 to successfully run for office against Trump.

Throughout his tenure as a politician in the federal government, Biden acquired the reputation for “speaking bluntly” (Proctor and Su 2011: 3254) and being “a back-slapping kind of a politician who says things he probably shouldn’t” who suffers from a serious case of “foot-in-mouth disease” (Wolf 2019). This reputation only became more prominent following his strong performances in the 2008 Democratic primary debates and his subsequent selection as the vice-presidential running mate by the then presidential candidate Barak Obama. This reputation followed him throughout his time as vice president from 2009 to 2017 to the point where many news organisations published lists of Biden’s most famous public speaking “gaffes” (ABC News 2007; Killough 2014). In addition to this attention from the press, fictionalised parodies of Biden also became a regular and popular feature of late-night television skits during his tenure as vice president, particularly on the programme *Saturday Night Live*.

In our surveying of Biden’s so-called verbal gaffe lists put up by media outlets, we have found the following 3 major categories. This includes Biden using socially tabooed language at formal public events (e.g. “This

is a big fucking deal”,⁸ “Isn’t it a bitch?”⁹ and similar). The second category includes Biden making ‘politically incorrect’ comments about particular communities of people in both humorous and rhetorical functions (e.g. Biden’s repetitive joke, “I may be a white boy, but I can X” and Biden’s description of LaGuardia Airport in New York City resembling a “third world country”). The final category of gaffes entails Biden mixing up his words (e.g. accidentally referring to then Prime Minister Teresa May as Margaret Thatcher in 2018¹⁰) or uttering something that is potentially (socially) awkward unintentionally in the given activity type’s context (e.g. the time Biden told a Missouri state senator to stand up at a campaign rally before remembering that he was in a wheelchair¹¹).

Despite this reputation as a loose cannon, it is also necessary to stress in this discussion that the press and even late-night television representations of Biden prior to him becoming president tended to approach their evaluations of Biden as more of a ‘lovable buffoon’ than a spiteful or mean-spirited figure. Naturally, his relationship with the press evolved after he ascended to the presidency, though much of the focus since 2020 has been on his age and cognitive abilities, as opposed to concerns about his alleged foot-in-mouth disease (see Ferris and Schneider 2024).

Moreover, since becoming president, Biden had also become a subject of multiple academic studies in which he was compared to so-called populist politicians. The results of these comparative studies demonstrate how Biden’s rhetoric, despite some of his idiosyncrasies, remains close to what would be expected from a moderate and traditional politician—thus arguing that his rhetorical style differs significantly to the language used by populist-leaning politicians such as Trump. Körner et al. (2022: 631) argue and demonstrate that Biden’s rhetorical style can be described as analytical and frequently relating to moral values. Furthermore, they show that Biden’s speeches contain more words related to positive social values and virtues and concepts of honesty and achievement. On the other hand, Trump’s speeches use more emotional language and express

⁸ A video clip of this event from CNN can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/0-Sl8hYzjkg?si=urobdIjSyDucEsrG>

⁹ A news clip from CNN of this event can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/73H9kutHw8U?si=Gzkki8cRCEEQ--sH>

¹⁰ See Pappas (2019).

¹¹ A transcript of this incident can be viewed on Time Magazine’s (2010) list of the top 10 Biden gaffes.

or attempt to engage in or enact coercive power. In another comparative study of Biden and Trump, Boyle et al. (2023) analysed the crises communication strategies of both campaigns in response to allegations of sexual misconduct. This comparative study found that the candidates and their respected campaign teams reacted in notably different ways to these allegations. For instance, even though the accusations against Trump in 2016 were much more numerous and severe, the Trump reaction to each allegation was immediate and used a variety of denial and diminishing strategies, though the results of their analysis highlighted that blaming the accuser or scapegoating became a trend for the Trump campaign. The Biden campaign, on the other hand, took a more measured approach to the allegations of sexual misconduct that threatened his campaign in 2020. They noted Biden and his campaign team engaged in “rebuilding” and even apologetic strategies that promised future change in behaviour, especially regarding the shoulder rubbing, hugging, and other breaches of personal space that made up the bulk of the accusations against him.

Finally, Macagno (2022) did a comparative study of politicians that included Biden. By comparing argumentative Tweets from three supposed populist politicians (Matteo Salvini of Italy, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, and Donald Trump) with Biden, he was able to demonstrate that Biden was clearly differentiated from the other three because he was the only politician in his analysis that did not use manipulative and fallacious arguments pervasively in his Tweets containing argumentation (Macagno 2022: 79). He also did not use *ad hominem* attacks against individuals or emotive words nearly as much as the other three politicians did.

2.5 HARRIS’ TAKEOVER OF THE 2024 DEMOCRATIC TICKET FOR THE PRESIDENCY

The presidential election of 2024 will be remembered as one of the most chaotic presidential elections in recent memory—even among the previous two involving Trump—for a variety of reasons. This contest involved a contentious Republican primary race in which Trump refused to participate in the debates, growing calls for the incumbent Joe Biden to drop out of the race, two assassination attempts against candidate Trump, Biden’s late withdrawal from the race on 21 July followed by Harris’ rushed takeover of the Democratic candidacy, and, finally, a string of controversies involving the heated political rhetoric involved

in the campaign season concerning all of the concerned candidates (see Chapter 5).

In the immediate aftermath of Harris' takeover of the Democratic party nomination for US Presidential candidate, the Harris campaign continued to fan the flames of previous controversies involving Trump and his running mate JD Vance via multiple trolling-like taunts. These taunts included comments about the small size of Trump's crowd sizes at his rallies from Harris herself, VP Candidate Tim Walz's implicational repetition of unverified suggestions that JD Vance had a sexual experience with a couch, and even Obama's implicational messages that suggested that Trump has small genitals (see Bort et al. 2024). Intriguingly, for our purposes here, the more controversial utterances of the Harris campaign all came from male colleagues during the campaign and not Harris herself.

Despite these pragmatically interesting taunting behaviours that arose after the Harris takeover of the campaign, our focus in this book will not expand to include detailed analysis of Harris' rhetoric.¹² The reason for this is simple, Harris does not have a similar track-record of producing controversial and off the cuff verbal gaffes or other offensive comments like we find with Trump and Biden, and indeed there were no comparable controversies concerning contested interpretations of ambiguous language formulations concerning her after she assumed the Democratic nomination for the presidency. In fact, as a female candidate from California who is roughly 20 years younger than both Trump and Biden, her rhetorical style has been highlighted in previous studies (see Holliday 2023) as much closer to that of a more traditional mainstream Democratic politician whose rhetoric is more disciplined and guarded than the two candidates that we focus on here. Moreover, Harris' rhetoric approaches sensitive issues such as ethnicity and inclusion in a much more sensitive fashion. This is reflected in her controlled use of non-standard Californian accent features as well as limited use of African American English features.

¹² It is also notable that this taunting strategy that seemed central to Harris' campaign strategy early on was progressively backgrounded in favour of a central message of 'joy' (Gangitano 2024).

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The Case Studies: Origins and Contexts of the Controversial Utterances

Abstract This chapter summarises the methodology and contextual background for analysing the three controversial utterances from the 2020 and 2024 US presidential elections that sparked the polarised interpretations that are investigated in Chapters 4 and 5. This study employs a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach, analysing the immediate contexts, press responses, and the top 100 YouTube comments on video clips from reputable news outlets featuring the three controversial utterances under investigation. The first case study examines Trump’s *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 from a 2020 rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that was widely criticised for its ethnically charged intertextual references. The second case study examines Trump’s comment at a 2024 Dayton, Ohio, rally, predicting a “bloodbath” if he was not re-elected. The third case study investigates Biden’s 2024 *bullseye* remark on a private donor call that was later criticised as incendiary after the 13 July 2024 assassination attempt against Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania. This sets the stage for the analyses in Chapters 4 and 5, exploring how context and audience schemata shape contested interpretations.

Keywords Controversial utterances · Political rhetoric · YouTube commenters · Context · Interpretation · Polarisation

3.1 METHODOLOGY FOR THE CASE STUDIES

As explained in Chapter 1, the bulk of the study undertaken here entails a dual qualitative and quantitative analysis of a selection of the most significant talk scandals involving polarised interpretations of indeterminate political rhetoric coming from the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections. Specifically, this entails one major controversy from President Trump in the 2020 campaign, another from the 2024 campaign, and one from President Biden from the 2024 campaign as well. For the qualitative analysis, we have scrutinised the publicly available materials featuring the speeches/conversations in question and have also considered the lead-up to the events in which the controversial utterances were made and the immediate aftermath of controversies thereafter.

The quantitative parts of our studies complement our qualitative parts because they expand the scope of our focus to include the reactions given by non-public figures. We approach this task by sampling and analysing the top 100 (most liked) comments featured on video clips containing the three controversial utterances that are found on YouTube that were posted to the platform by reputable news providers. For these analyses, we selected short video clips whose titles feature the controversial phrases and that contain only the immediate context of the utterances being investigated. We believe that this type of data is appropriate for our purposes specifically because these videos foster—we believe—an environment where a maximum amount of the comments would concentrate on the speaker's utterance itself as opposed to addressing other issues. While we fully acknowledge that social media data can be problematic, especially when one takes account of the issues surrounding the infection of YouTube—among all other platforms—by trolls and bots, we also find this data remains valuable because of the importance that social media plays in framing political discourse in the modern political landscape in the United States and elsewhere (Abeshouse 2018). Moreover, we argue that by sampling the top 100 comments of each video only, we are also increasing our chances of engaging with more legitimate data as opposed to bots or trolls engaging in unrelated abrasive behaviours. Naturally, this does not guarantee that all the comments that we engage with are legitimate in the sense of being honest reactions of the politically engaged public, but we argue that it makes it sufficient for our purposes of gauging the active YouTube community's reactions to these controversies. Finally, we chose YouTube specifically as the best social media

platform to engage with because its active user community is among the more diverse regarding age distribution and, though its community is slightly more represented by men (54%) than women (46%), it is not as skewed towards one gender over the other as some other platforms (i.e. such as X/Twitter whose users are 63% male and 37% female, see Zote 2024). Moreover, as our analyses in Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate, this data provides us with variety of different types of commenters and the results even provided us with a fair share of unexpected results as well.

3.2 DATA FOR TRUMP CASE STUDIES

In the first case study, we analyse Trump's first utterance of his controversial *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 during the 2020 election season. While this nickname was first (publicly) used by Trump during a campaign rally on 20 June 2020 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, there was a months-long buildup surrounding Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the epithets that Trump publicly and allegedly used when referring to the virus itself. *Kung flu* was, in fact, only one example of these dysphemistic epithets/nicknames for the virus, though it was by far the most controversial of all of them (see the summary of the context given in Chapter 4.) Like the other ethnically charged nicknames that he has used prior to this one (i.e. *Pocahontas* for Senator Warren and *Fredo* for CNN New anchor Chris Cuomo), Trump's *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 was similarly controversial because of its intertextual reference to an ethnic stereotype.

For the YouTube comment analysis section of this case study, we opted to use a YouTube video hosted on Bloomberg Television's YouTube channel. We selected this video because of its efficient inclusion of the immediate and relevant lead-up to Trump's utterance of the *kung flu* nickname and the inclusion of the rally audience's reaction to his use of it. The title of the video also highlights its focus on Trump's use of *kung flu*. The video is entitled "Trump calls Coronavirus 'Kung Flu'" (Bloomberg 2020).

In Chapter 5, we look at two controversial utterances that occurred during the 2024 election. We begin with another case study concerning Trump. In this case, we analyse an utterance made by Trump during a campaign rally in Dayton, Ohio, on 18 March 2024 during which Trump predicted that there would be a "bloodbath" if he was not elected. As our analysis shows, there was certainly some ambiguity as to whether he was talking about an economic *bloodbath* that would occur due to the

economic issues mentioned immediately prior to this utterance or whether he meant that there would literally be violence in the streets should he not be elected. Issues surrounding Trump inciting violence in the streets has been a particular concern for his detractors since the events leading to the insurrection against the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021 (see discussion in Sect. 5.1). Trump has been accused by the press and his political adversaries of bearing responsibility for those events because of his incendiary rhetoric given at a speech immediately before the attack of the US Capitol Building (Reilly 2024).

Our YouTube comment data for this case study was sampled from a video featured on the NBC's *Today Show* YouTube channel entitled "Trump says there will be a 'bloodbath' if he isn't re-elected" (Today at NBC 2024). Similarly to the video selected for the *kung flu* case study, this video is clipped in a manner that focuses on Trump's comment about the potential "bloodbath" that would result should he not be elected, while also providing some essential context both before and immediately after he makes this comment.

3.2.1 *Data for Biden Case Study*

Biden was championed by Democrats in the 2020 election as a centre-left moderate capable of swinging independents away from Trump. Much of his appeal at the time came from his well-established record as a centrist senator who could work across the political divide as well as his ability to connect with blue-collar/lower middle-class voters.¹ However, Biden's position as a competitive candidate was significantly damaged by 2024 after a difficult term in office due to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple international conflicts, and a growing controversy surrounding his cognitive abilities. Though Biden was successful in securing his position in the 2024 Democratic primaries, doubts surrounding his ability to successfully complete a second term continued and only became more significant after his disastrous performance in his debate with Trump on 27 June 2024.

¹ In fact, Biden was regularly sent to campaign on Obama's behalf in key working and lower middle-class areas because he was credited with being able to communicate with them using "their own language" (Sullivan 2012). Coincidentally, it was precisely these voters that Biden managed to win back from Trump in 2020 in key 'rust belt' swing states.

In the days following this debate, Biden’s campaign faced mounting pressure as leading Democrats began calling on him to drop out of the race. This issue came up again during a conference call with hundreds of major Democratic donors on 8 July 2024, during which he is reported to have defiantly stated:

I have one job, and that’s to beat Donald Trump. I’m absolutely certain I’m the best person to be able to do that. So, we’re done talking about the debate, it’s time to put Trump in a bullseye (Ferris and Schneider 2024).

While this conversation received little attention at the time of its initial reporting, this comment suddenly found itself under increased scrutiny following the assassination attempt against Trump on 13 July. The new significance of this utterance can be attributed to comments made by Republican politicians such as Georgia Congressman Mike Collins and Colorado Congresswoman Laura Boebert (Spring 2024). Direct comparisons were drawn between this utterance and Trump’s *bloodbath* comment, with the further assumption that the assassination attempt—occurring just days after Biden’s *bullseye* remark was made—served as evidence of its incendiary nature.

As there is no recording of Biden’s conference call available to the public, we are reliant on the original Politico article (Ferris and Schneider 2024) that quotes him making this and a few other comments and a subsequent interview that he did with Lester Holt of NBC News on 15 July. During this interview, Holt specifically asked Biden about his own role in creating a tense and potentially inflammatory political environment leading up to the assassination attempt of Trump, citing his *bullseye* comment as an example. As the interview is the only publicly available recording involving Biden discussing the *bullseye* comment, our comment analysis therefore falls on an official NBC News clip of this segment of the interview. We chose the specific video clip entitled “‘It was a mistake’ to use ‘bull’s-eye’ in remarks about Trump” (NBC News 2024).

Comparing these two utterances by Trump and Biden for the 2024 election cycle is fruitful to our overall investigation of contested interpretations of political rhetoric because of the unique connections that they share that are unparalleled compared to the previous two presidential contests involving Donald Trump. To our knowledge, this is the only contest of the past three that involves two such comparable talk scandals involving indeterminate language between Trump and his Democratic

contender. Indeed, the *bloodbath* and *bullseye* comments share some similarities, but they are also different as well regarding their surrounding contextual features and differences relating to the discursive histories of Trump and Biden specifically. This is addressed in detail in Chapter 5, Sect. 5.4.

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Analysis of the *Kung Flu* Incident

Abstract This chapter focuses on Donald Trump’s controversial *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19, uttered during a political rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on 20 June 2020, within the polarised 2020 US presidential election. The analysis reveals *kung flu* as a phrasal portmanteau blending “kung fu” and “flu” that leveraged intertextual humour to shame China while fostering rapport with Trump’s own supporters. Critics labelled it a racist slur, while supporters found it entertaining, highlighting its humorous and playful nature. Drawing on Archer’s (2011a, 2015) face aggravation scale, the chapter positions *kung flu* as a creative yet spiteful insult that is thinly veiled as jocular mockery. The analysis shows that *kung flu* blends strategic ambivalence with intentional impoliteness that enables plausible deniability. The chapter underscores how Trump’s creative insults, akin to jocular mockery, manipulate audience perceptions, setting verbal traps for detractors and reinforcing supporter identity.

Keywords Kung flu · Trump · Impoliteness · Humour · Polarisation · Intertextuality

4.1 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE *KUNG FLU* INCIDENT

Much like the 2016 presidential election campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the 2020 presidential election campaign between Donald Trump and Joe Biden was particularly bitter and full of insults and general mudslinging from both sides. For his part, Trump regularly taunted then candidate Biden with a slew of nicknames both online and during his rallies. His dysphemistic nicknames included *Sleepy Joe*, *Sleepy Creepy Joe*, and *Crazy Joe*. During the first presidential debate on the 29 September 2020, Biden used a variety of insults against Trump that included calling him *a racist, a liar, a clown*, and even *Putin's puppy*.¹ Biden also delivered pointed criticisms such as “The fact is this man [Trump] doesn't know what he's talking about” and even resorted to using the following silencer formula, “Will you shut up, man?”. In all, the 2020 presidential election campaign went down as one of the most confrontational presidential campaigns in American history at the time, and the first debate has been highlighted as a particular low point. The general consensus from the American mainstream press was that the first presidential debate was “a disaster” (Lopez 2020b). ABC News host George Stephanopoulos described that debate as “the worst presidential debate I have ever seen in my life”. Similarly, NBC News host Lester Holt called the debate a “low point in political discourse”. More creatively, Jake Tapper of CNN characterised the debate metaphorically as “a hot mess inside a dumpster fire inside a train wreck” (Fridkin and Kenney 2024: 38), thus multi-metaphorically demonstrating the perception of the excessively poor nature of the debate between the two candidates.

However, while interesting in their own right from the perspective of impoliteness studies (see Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011) the insulting behaviours mentioned above do not constitute the sort of phenomena that we are interested in here, as those sorts of impolite utterances used by Trump and Biden were understood by all audiences involved as clear-cut cases of gratuitous impoliteness; though the evaluations of the *appropriateness* or *degree of offensiveness* of the different utterances given by both Trump and Biden may be contested. As explained in Chapter 3, the

¹ A full transcript of the first 2020 presidential debate is provided by the *American Presidency Project*: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-debate-case-western-reserve-university-cleveland-ohio>

present chapter focuses upon Trump’s utterances of an ethnically charged pejorative nickname that does not involve Biden nor any other American political adversary. Rather it focuses upon COVID-19 and its country of origin, China. In fact, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump coined a variety of ethnically charged epithets for the virus that explicitly linked it to China and the people of China, including: *the Wuhan virus*, *the China virus*, *the Chinese virus*, *the Chinese flu*, *the China flu*, *the China* [sic], and, most notably, *kung flu*.²

The *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 stands out among the rest and was deemed particularly offensive by many because of the creativity of its coinage and intertextual references to a famous, well respected, and globally practised Chinese martial arts discipline—kung fu. The use of *kung flu* was, of course, formed by blending *kung fu* and the common clip for influenza (i.e. *flu*) in a ‘phrasal *portmanteau*’. The nickname was first used by Trump in a frontstage political event during his first 2020 campaign rally, which was also coincidentally Trump’s first rally since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This rally took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on the 20 June 2020.

However, concerns regarding Trump’s ethnically charged language involving COVID-19 had been an issue since the pandemic began. In fact, Trump had been calling COVID-19 *the Chinese virus* since the onset of the pandemic. Many members of the Asian American community as well as American society at large found use of the terms *the Chinese virus*—and later *kung flu*—to be deeply offensive and many even argued that it was a racist attack, if not a slur, against people of Asian backgrounds (see Nakamura 2020). Trump and other members of his administration defended his use of these controversial epithets as neither racist nor ethnically charged, but merely a reflection of the fact that the virus came from China; and consequently this usage was an indictment by Trump of the Chinese government’s perceived poor handling of the virus in its early stages (see Rogers et al. 2020). It is, of course, this difference of perception and interpretation, and the pragmatic reasons for it, that we are most interested in here in this chapter.

This said, while Trump and his team attempted to defend themselves for calling COVID-19 *the China/Chinese virus* in March 2020,

² This is an aggregate list of Trump’s epithets for COVID-19 spanning early 2020 through the end of his term in office. They were also listed during the Tulsa rally and Turning Point speech given in June 2020.



Fig. 4.1 Weijia Jiang Tweet accusing Trump staffer of calling COVID-19 *kung flu*³

there had been numerous rumours coming out of the White House that some staffers and potentially Trump himself were already using the *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 in private ‘backstage’ interactions. On 17 March 2020, CBS News consultant and Chinese American Weijia Jiang sent out a Tweet that accused an unnamed White House official of calling COVID-19 the *kung flu* in front of her during a private conversation (see Fig. 4.1).

The next day, Trump’s Senior Counselor Kellyanne Conway spoke to reporters outside the White House and defended Trump’s use of *the Chinese virus* but also denied knowing of anyone who called COVID-19 *kung flu*. She went on to vehemently denounce any use of the *kung flu* epithet, stating that using it was “highly offensive” as well as “very hurtful and unhelpful” (Graziosi 2020a).⁴

Amid this growing outrage throughout March as well as reports of increased attacks against Asian Americans in the United States as the pandemic began to take hold, Trump did backtrack somewhat in late March. In a Tweet from 21 March 2020, Trump stated that:

³ This Tweet can be viewed on X via this link: <https://x.com/weijia/status/1239923246801334283?lang=en>

⁴ An extended video of Kellyanne Conway addressing the press gaggle can be viewed via the following video posted by The Hill: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXi0NAMgNOY>

It is very important that we totally protect our Asian American community in the United States [...] They're amazing people and the spreading of the virus is not their fault in any way, shape or form.⁵

Trump expanded on this the next day during a Fox News Town Hall broadcast by stating that he would “pull back” on calling the virus the *China/Chinese virus* because he believed that he had sufficiently brought attention to the fact that he blamed China for the outbreak of COVID-19 (Vazquez 2020b). Despite this uncharacteristic backpedalling on his part at the time, he also continued to insist that calling the virus the *Chinese virus* was not racist (see also Vazquez 2020a).

However, this change of heart was short-lived. Trump not only called COVID-19 *the Chinese virus* again during the Tulsa rally three months later on 20 June 2020, but he escalated things further by also calling it *kung flu* for the very first time in public. From the outset, this rally was controversial for a variety of reasons before Trump even uttered *kung flu* (Karni et al. 2020). Firstly, this rally received a great deal of media attention and criticism from Democrats and various health officials because it was held while the COVID-19 pandemic was still well underway without social distancing nor mask wearing being enforced. Criticism for this only increased after COVID-19 cases flared up in the local area in the days leading up to and immediately after the controversial rally took place (Astor and Weiland 2020). Secondly, the rally was controversial even in the early stages of planning because it had originally been scheduled for 19 June—also known as ‘Juneteenth’—a day that celebrates the end of slavery in the United States. The fact that Trump wanted to schedule a rally on this day in the city that witnessed the Tulsa Race Massacre, one of the worst racially driven riots and massacres in American history, had such bad *optics* that the pressure on Trump to reschedule the rally a day later eventually came to fruition.⁶ Accusations of racism were also levelled against him in the weeks leading up to the Tulsa rally because of negative comments that he made about the protests that were led by the

⁵ Trump’s chain of Tweets that includes the text quoted here can viewed in their entirety here: <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?startDate=%222020-03-23%22&endDate=%222020-03-24%22>

⁶ This was also known as the Tulsa Race Riot or the Black Wall Street Massacre. It took place between 31 May and 1 June 1921. It resulted in the entire African American district in Tulsa being destroyed by a white vigilante mob.

Black Lives Matter movement that were taking place in response to the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. However, it was his comments about COVID-19 at the rally itself that caught the most attention from Democratic politicians, the press, and ordinary citizens in the end. These comments concerning COVID-19 during the Tulsa rally and a subsequent speech that Trump gave in Phoenix, Arizona, is the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF THE *KUNG FLU* INCIDENT AND THE REACTIONS OF THE PUBLIC

In the segment of the Tulsa rally in which Trump utters *kung flu*, Trump was complaining about the global reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of not placing the blame for the virus on the nation of its origin, China. While complaining, he makes the following comments about the multiple names for COVID-19:

Trump: COVID-19 [AUDIENCE MEMBERS SHOUT] that name gets further and further away from China. As opposed to calling it ‘the Chinese virus’ [APPLAUSE][...] It’s a disease. Without question, has more names than any disease in history. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] I can name (..) ‘kung flu’ [LAUGHTER & APPLAUSE]. I can name (..) 19 different versions of names. Many call it a virus, which it is. Many call it a flu, what difference! I think we have 19 or20 versions of the name.
(Bloomberg Television 2020)

Despite the warm reception of Trump’s nickname for COVID-19 at the rally itself, reactions from the press and from other public officials was markedly more critical of it—with many sources labelling *kung flu* as an anti-Asian slur (Nakamura 2020), a racially insensitive moniker (Itkowitz 2020), and racist language (Oprysko 2020). Throughout his presidency, Trump’s insulting language was generally not well received from prestige media sources (see Wodak et al. 2021). Their coverage of him was rocky from the start, and it ultimately resulted in Trump’s creation of the pejorative nickname *fake news*, which he levelled against any news organisation that he considered overly critical of him or his administration (see Bourgeois *in press*). In reaction to the *kung flu* controversy, many regarded Trump’s public utterance of *kung flu* as an escalation of the controversy surrounding his early use of *the China/Chinese virus* epithets for

COVID-19. In reaction to the *kung flu* controversy, several prominent Asian Americans, including former Obama administration cabinet secretary Chris Lu, actor George Takei, former US attorney Preet Bharara, and tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang publicly denounced the president's language as racist on their social media platforms (Nakamura 2020). Counter to this, the Trump administration defended his use of *kung flu* and argued that it was not a racial slur. Ultimately, they accused the press and others of overreacting (Oprysko 2020).

Despite immediate and substantial criticism and outrage from Democrats and the mainstream press, Trump was not swayed to apologise or backtrack on his words in the aftermath of this rally. In fact, during a speech that he gave at the Dream City Church in Phoenix, Arizona, just three days later (see quote below), Trump referenced the part of his Tulsa rally speech where he commented on the names used for COVID-19 and—with considerable audience encouragement—said *kung flu* again. The utterance of *kung flu* was met with enthusiastic applause.

Trump: [...] I said, the other night — did anybody see my speech the other night, on Saturday night? [APPLAUSE] [...] I could give you 19 or 20 names for that, right? It's got all different names. 'Wuhan' (...) Wuhan was catching on (..) 'Coronavirus', right? [AUDIENCE MEMBERS SHOUT]

Audience: Kung flu!

Trump: 'Kung flu' (..) yeah. [APPLAUSE] Kung flu [APPLAUSE] (...) COVID. COVID-19. COVID. I said, "What's the 19?" COVID-19. Some people can't explain what the 19 — give me the — COVID-19. I said, "That's an odd name." I could give you many, many names (...) Some people call it 'the Chinese flu,' 'the China flu', right? They call it 'the China', as opposed to Chi - the China (..) I've never seen anything like it.

(Reuters 2020)

Interestingly, it is a member of the audience that prompts Trump to say *kung flu* by shouting it out first. In this case, Trump merely repeats it as opposed to uttering it unprovoked as before. This accompanied with the enthusiastic applause that it receives demonstrates the extent to which Trump's enthusiastic base receives *kung flu* differently than the communities such as mainstream journalists (ancillary audience members) and consumers of their news content (extended audience members) that received it as highly offensive if not inherently racist. Moreover, the fact

that many in the pro-Trump camp found it funny and highly entertaining is evident from many of the various memes and spoof videos shared on social media during the controversies surrounding the White House's coinages of new names/nicknames for COVID-19. Ironically, one such social media post comes from Trump's eldest child Don Jr. who shared a doctored video clip of the final fight scene from the *Karate Kid* film (Avildsen 1984) via Instagram on March 26th with the following comment: "Hahahahaha The Kung-Flu Kid" (Graziosi 2020b). The video has the head of the main character, Daniel LaRusso, replaced by Trump's head and an American flag and the head of LaRusso's nemesis replaced by an image of COVID-19 and a Chinese flag.

Besides social media posts making intertextual references to the *Karate Kid* films, another common humorous reference involves the popular 1970s funk song *Kung Fu Fighting* (Douglas 1974). Such jocularly humorous recontextualisations of Trump's actions and utterances by his supporters within the frames of iconic films, television, or music has been a consistent feature of Trump's political career since his entrance into politics. Indeed, similar practices among online communities have been found concerning Trump's insults against individuals such as Senator Elizabeth Warren (e.g. *Pocahontas*), journalist Chris Cuomo (e.g. *Fredo*), and news organisations in general (e.g. *Fake News*), among others (see Bourgeois *in press*). These online references receive further attention in Sect. 4.3 to which we turn now.

4.3 YOUTUBE COMMENT ANALYSIS OF THE TULSA RALLY *KUNG FLU* VIDEO

By spring 2020 such back-and-forths became a common feature of the Trump presidency where his detractors reacted strongly to comments made by the president while those who supported him defended him and his rhetorical style. These polarisations of views are even more evident from an analysis of the comments found on the video of the Tulsa rally that we use as data. This video can be found on Bloomberg's YouTube channel and is titled "Trump Calls Coronavirus 'Kung Flu'" (2020). At the time of conducting our analysis, this video received over 252 thousand views, 2.2 thousand *likes*, and 3.8 thousand *dislikes*. We analysed the top 100 (most liked) comments from the video's 3,806 comments according to YouTube's algorithm and categorised them based on their reaction to Trump's utterances. Table 4.1 indicates that 60 of the

top 100 commenters reacted to Trump’s behaviour in this video negatively. However, 13 of these commenters reacted favourably to Trump’s behaviour in the video and the utterance of *kung flu* particularly. Along a similar vein, three commenters took anti-media stances regarding their treatment of Trump in their coverage. Three comments take a humorous stance towards the video but make no indication whether they approve of Trump’s use of *kung flu* or not. Finally, 12 commenters make comments that are unrelated to Trump’s language in the video. It is immediately noteworthy that a majority of the commenters to this video reacted negatively to Trump’s controversial utterances because previous studies that have analysed the comments left on YouTube videos involving Trump have found that the comments usually overwhelmingly rate Trump’s impolite behaviours positively with only a small minority making negative comments about him (see Wodak, Culpeper, and Semino 2021). This therefore highlights that the utterance of the *kung flu* nickname was indeed unusually controversial and negatively evaluated, even for a Trump political controversy.

The negative comments attack Trump over a variety of themes ranging from comments concerning the utterance of *kung flu* itself (e.g. “Kung Flu said by King Fool”) to generic negative comments about Trump (e.g. “Goldfish have more common sense than Trump”). Of the 60 anti-Trump comments, they can be broken down into the following sub-categories:

- Commenters assert that Trump is a joke (15)
- Commenters assert that Trump is crazy/stupid (12)
- Commenters criticise Trump’s handling of COVID-19 (11)
- Commenters argue that Trump is a bad president (10)

Table 4.1 Comment analysis of top 100 comments from the *kung flu* video

<i>Types of responses</i>	<i>Frequency (out of 100)</i>
Anti-Trump reactions	60
Pro-Trump reactions	13
Unrelated	12
Neutral	9
Anti-Mainstream media	3
Unclear	3
Total	100

- Commenters attack Trump via his supporters (7)
- Commenters comment of the “mad reality” of the times represented by Trump’s behaviour (5)

On the other hand, it is notable that the commenters who approve of Trump and his utterance of *kung flu* often find him entertaining and even humorous. Such comments include people stating this ostensibly as in, “This guy is hilarious”. Other comments express this by making humorous intertextual comments themselves. Two such comments quote adjusted lyrics of the chorus lines of 1970s disco song “Kung Fu Fighting” itself, as in, “Everybody was kung flu fighting. It’s spreading fast as lightning”. The pro-Trump comments can be broken down into the following sub-categories:

- Engaging with *kung flu* nickname humorously (6)
- Commenters assert that Trump is hilarious (5)
- Commenters stating that they love/enjoy Trump (2)

There were also nine comments that were neutral in terms of evaluating Trump’s behaviour in the video clip, and his utterance of *kung flu*. These nine comments are subcategorised as follows:

- Commenters asserting that this is typical Trump, though not condoning him (4)
- Commenters asserting that this should not be news (3)
- Commenters arguing that Trump is funny, though also inappropriate (2)

Concerning the comments that discuss the humorous nature of the *kung flu* nickname, it is interesting because they, like the ostensibly pro-Trump commenters, appear to find his utterance of *kung flu* entertainingly funny. However, unlike the ostensibly pro-Trump commenters, they do not blatantly condone this nickname either, as expressed in the comment that we paraphrase below:

He must be joking [...] I bet his whole presidency is secretly a reality TV series, and they haven’t realised it yet.

Concerning the commenters who argue that Trump's use of *kung flu* should not be news, the general line of criticism is that the media should not be focusing so much attention on it. This is expressed in the paraphrased comment below:

And this is news because?

These conflicting responses to Trump's utterance of an ethnically charged nickname for COVID-19 highlights the multifunctionality that such face-attacking utterances against others can serve in the political rally activity type. Indeed, entertaining impoliteness has been observed in previous studies to serve both *anti-social roles* regarding the target of the impoliteness, and *social bonding roles* concerning the wider target audience who they intend to entertain (Culpeper 2005; Culpeper 2011: 233–239). In his monograph on humour, Billig (2005: 176) convincingly argues that humour is paradoxical because “it can bring people together in a bond of enjoyment, and, by mockery, it can exclude people”. In the case of calling COVID-19 *kung flu*, this double-edged sword of a social and anti-social purpose is certainly in play.

Arguably the most important element of the political rally activity type is manufacturing rapport with one's target audience and strengthening a collective understanding of specific problems facing their shared society. At the Tulsa rally, Trump is attempting to refocus the blame for the COVID-19 pandemic solely on China. This highlights his reality paradigm (Archer 2011b, 2020) that regards himself as well as the nation's role in the pandemic as that of a victim of the spread of the virus that originated in China. In the quoted segment of the Tulsa rally speech provided in Sect. 4.2 above and in the longer context of this rally, Trump attacks China in a variety of ways of which the intertextual humorous nickname is only one method. Trump's socially deviant behaviours during formal political rallies are highly incongruent with what is observed with traditional politicians (see incongruity humour theory in Billig 2005; Simpson and Bousfield 2017). Moreover, Trump's insulting behaviour during these rallies has become a recognisable trait of his presidential style (as well as in the decades that preceded his entrance into politics) to such an extent that it has become something that the public and his supporters especially not only expect, but in some cases even look forward to viewing. However, besides building rapport with his audience at the rally and online, Trump also uses the nickname *kung*

flu to ridicule and socially shame China for, in his view, their transgression of allowing COVID-19 to spread around the globe. This ridiculing function of humour has been widely discussed by superiority theorists of humour (e.g. Berson 1911; Hobbes 1996 [1651]), particularly in terms of its use as a form of social discipline against those who do not behave “appropriately” (Billig 2005: Ch. 9; Toddington 2015: 113–115).

This multifunctionality of entertaining impoliteness in cases such as this highlights how different audiences can come to such different interpretations of the same utterance. In the case of the ‘ancillary’ and ‘extended’ audience members analysed above, the majority appear to concentrate their interpretation on the ethnically insensitive nature and the punching down/social ridicule functions of the *kung flu* insult while downplaying any social bonding effect of Trump “just joking around”. On the other hand, Trump’s intended audience (i.e. his supporters) give more importance to the social bonding function of his speech that expressed their shared identity construction as victims of China’s perceived mishandling of COVID-19 and downplay the ridiculing and ethnically insensitive aspect of the utterance.

4.4 DISCUSSION OF THE *KUNG FLU* INCIDENT

While there is little doubt that Trump’s *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 is uttered with the goal of shaming China for being responsible for the spreading of COVID-19, the issue surrounding whether *kung flu* carries racist connotations remained debatable among the different audiences found among the American public. As noted above, *kung flu* is constructed as a ‘phrasal portmanteau’ by blending the compound *kung fu* with *flu*. This insult blend contains an obvious reference to the Chinese discipline of martial arts—which has become well known in the United States due to the importation of Chinese kung fu films from the 1970s. *Kung flu* clearly references ethnicity via an intertextual reference of a popular cultural stereotype. This type of creative reference to ethnicity is similar to other pejorative nicknames created by Trump as mentioned above in that he uses popular cultural references to create a dysphemistic nickname that denigrates and ‘others’ the target of his ire while also generating humour. This is indeed what he is doing with *kung flu*. It denigrates the Chinese by characterising them as distinctively foreign and threatening. The use of such stereotypes to characterise a group of people shares some characteristics with racial slurs (see Jay 1992; Croom 2013),

though it is also important to highlight that *kung flu* is used to denote a virus and not a person. Moreover, the intertextual reference to the martial arts style/film genre also does not appear to carry the same offensiveness potential across all contexts. This disagreement about the pragmatic force of the *kung flu* nickname for COVID-19 provides a substantial example of why hearer-centric models cannot be fully depended upon for making academic determinations about labelling categories of language, especially such controversial ones as *slurs* or *racist language*. While the illocutionary force of wanting to blame COVID-19 on China is blatantly obvious for all audiences, the specific pragmatic force is less clear. While Trump's detractors argue that *kung flu* is obviously an ethnic slur that attacks the Chinese as a whole, Trump and his allies claim with similar certainty that he is simply coming up with a clever and humorous nickname that highlights the fault for the virus on the government of the nation where it originated.

In fact, creative insults have been found to be a common humour generating feature of conversational and social media dialogue in academic publications for decades (see Labov 1972; Dynel 2021). Dynel (2021) highlights how such humour can be used either genuinely or in jocular insults that are typically viewed as devoid of malevolent intent (see also Haugh and Bousfield 2012). Moreover, she also proposes a subcategory of genuine insults that she labels as "humorous genuine insults" that captures the practice where the insulter creates a "wittily formulated but purposely offensive insult that is commonplace especially in multi-party interactions" as found in social media, talk shows, etc. (Dynel 2021: 26).

As a former reality television host, such usage of exploitative humorous insults has long been a common strategy used by Trump in *The Apprentice*. By using hyperbolic harshness that is often associated with "inoffensive intent" (Dynel 2017) and thus "jocular abuse" (Dynel 2021: 30), Trump's use of insults such as *kung flu* sends out a mixed message. The sugar-coating of his insults via witty humour therefore makes the pragmatic force behind his insults entertaining for his supporters while simultaneously being frustrating for his detractors and highly offensive to his targets. In fact, using mixed messages in his creative insults set "verbal traps" for the targets (see Bousfield 2007a).⁷ Should they follow

⁷ Bousfield (2007a) investigated conversations from "hole in the wall" documentary serials, and his analysis demonstrated that speakers could exploit the natures of both

social convention and reciprocate Trump’s impoliteness, Trump and his followers could simply accuse them of being overly sensitive and incapable of “taking a joke” (see Culpeper, Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2017: 335; Haugh 2017) or of “taking themselves too seriously” (Haugh and Bousfield 2012). However, should the targets of the insults not respond at all, they also risk reinforcing the face loss that they suffered in the first place because they appear to have been bested by him (see discussion of balance of payments in the discussion of the ‘principle of (im)politeness reciprocity’ in Culpeper and Tantucci 2021: 151). Therefore, by setting his targets up with witty insults and nicknames, Trump—as well as his allies—have the advantage of being able to accuse them being “weak” and/or unable to properly defend themselves no matter how they react.

The provocative nature of Trump’s creative insulting methodology in cases like *kung flu* has led some of his detractors to liken Trump and his supporters’ insulting behaviours to online trolling (e.g. Chatfield 2016; Bensinger 2023). However, though there are certainly elements of Trump’s insulting behaviours that are similar to online trolling, equating them to online trolling is also problematic due to a number of key differences. Firstly, the layperson’s definitions of trolling vary from more objective understandings that reflect the definitions of it (see below) to more subjective understandings that equate trolling with any behaviour that they find offensive, particularly when the content of the supposed troll’s opinion differs from their own. The OED defines online trolling as follows:

Troll (verb) Additional sense (2006)
intransitive. Computing slang. To post a deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response. Also *transitive*: to elicit such a response from (a person); to post messages of this type to (a newsgroup, etc.).

Hardaker’s (2010, 2013) research on online trolling also tackles the elusive nature of producing a clear definition for trolls/trolling using discussion group data. Basing her findings on the receivers’ reactions to perceived trolls—as she acknowledges that definitively outing a poster

conducive questions and of preference organisation to “verbally trap” their interlocutors into damaging their own faces.

as a troll is highly problematic unless the person themselves admits their intent to troll.—Hardaker identifies six (often overlapping) strategies used by trollers in her data that fall along a cline from covertly antagonistic to overtly antagonistic: digression, (hypo)criticism, antipathising (i.e. taking alienating positions), endangering (i.e. pretended help or advice), shocking (i.e. being insensitive about taboo topics), and aggressing (i.e. insulting, threatening, or otherwise plainly attacking them without (adequate) provocation). Furthermore, Hardaker (2013: 79f) proposes the following working definition for trolls/trolling which amended her earlier definition from 2010:

DEFINITION

Trolling is the deliberate (perceived) use of impoliteness/aggression, deception and/or manipulation in CMC to create a context conducive to triggering or antagonising conflict, typically for amusement's sake.

METHOD

Trolling may be perceived as being more or less covert. H may assess S's behaviour as covert trolling if he thinks that she is using covert strategies to construct an online identity that is (mostly) inconsistent with her desired outcome (e.g. she may use a surreptitiously manipulative, trust-based approach that leaves more reasonably defensible explanations for her behaviour than just an intention to troll).

H may assess S's behaviour as overt trolling if he thinks that she is using overt strategies to construct an online identity that is (mostly) consistent with her desired outcome (e.g. she may use an explicitly manipulative, aggression-based approach that leaves no other reasonably defensible explanation for her behaviour than an intention to troll).

Philips (2015: 23) similarly investigated the 4chan /b/ online trolling community and Facebook trolling community of the 2000s–middle 2010s and found that trolling covers a spectrum of behaviours. Some trolling behaviours can be incredibly aggressive (sometimes even meeting the threshold for legal harassment) while other behaviours can be “comparatively innocuous” (i.e. *Rickrolling*). In defining online trolls, Philips (2015: Ch. 1) lists the following key markers of the “subcultural” traditional online trolls: self-identification as trolls (e.g. on 4chan or Facebook), the *lulz* (which in this community is similar to *Schadenfreude*), and the celebration of anonymity. When it comes to how trolls express their identity, Philips (2015: 24) argues that trolls engage in certain behaviours as an expression of their troll identity that includes racism or sexism or

homophobia, disrupting a forum with stupid questions, or generally being annoying.

Working with these varying definitions above, it becomes obvious that Trump's behaviour in the *kung flu* incident cannot be fully equated with traditional trolling, which would have to involve anonymity and deception as two key elements (Philips 2015: Ch. 1; see also Dynel 2016). However, comparing the *kung flu* insult and other similar creative insults used by Trump with trolling does highlight some key overlaps between entertaining impoliteness, jocular mockery among one group against another, and the more contemporary conception of trolling— which since the late 2010s now focuses primarily on strategies closer to what scholars of traditional trolling call “flaming”. In this literature, flaming is defined as sending aggressive messages that threaten other social media users in ways that often also target their most sensitive face-laden attributes such as their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity (e.g. O’Sullivan and Flanagan 2003; Johnson et al. 2008). However, some academics have gone as far as to assert that what the previous studies called *flaming*, is now the new trend in trolling behaviours to the point that most laypeople do not see trolling and flaming as distinct and now equate flaming behaviours with trolling itself more so than traditional trolling behaviours. Using online survey data that asked respondents to define and provide examples of online trolling, Ortiz (2020: 6) argues that respondent narratives suggest that “trolling is a mechanism through which (w)hite men, especially politically conservative men, collectively target others with their rage, disgust, and discontent” and that it is also a strategy “to virtually respond to real and perceived demographic, political, and economic changes that mobilize and outrage”. Coincidentally, Philips (2015: Ch. 9) argued five years earlier that online trolling has been going through a major shift since the 2010s in which the deception, humoristic, and even artful elements of trolling have become less important while the aggressiveness and identity-based harm by predominantly young white men against women, minorities, and liberal-leaning organisations have taken on a more central role. However, Philips also warned that equating trolls with white conservative young men attacking women, minorities, and other vulnerable communities was too simplistic and would overlook the complexity of trolling behaviours. For instance, Philips argues that trolling can still span from benevolent to highly aggressive online behaviours, and she stresses the role that mainstream society (particularly the press) plays in fanning the flames of the current online troll culture.

Our interpretation of the situation tends to side more with the argument made by Philips and other academics like Dynel (2016: 376) who warn against the temptation to update the definition of trolling to constituting primarily flaming behaviours only as Ortiz does because online trolling continues to cover a multitude of behaviours along a cline. Moreover, though it is certainly true that much of the aggressive and threatening behaviours are directed by young white males towards women and members of minority communities, our research into Trump and Trump's supposed troll army also provides plenty of examples of Trump and his supporters attacking powerful white men using flaming techniques that include insults and threats that target their sensitive face aspects as well (see discussion in Sect. 2.3). Therefore, our observations lead us to argue that contemporary online trolls are often willing to personally attack whoever they target using whatever means necessary to hurt and potentially intimidate them the most. In many cases this includes resorting to misogynistic, racist, ableist, or whatever objectionable rhetoric that they have at their disposal—which does not make what they do any less horrendous or damaging to the people on the receiving end of it.

Coming back to our *kung flu* data, we run into similar difficulty in terms of how to define the behaviours that we are observing. It is not our intention to jump into this debate on providing a concise definition of trolls/trolling vs. flaming here. However, our data certainly highlights the problematic nature of over-relying on the definitions and inferences made by laypeople, especially in cases where the data involves controversial topics and people. While it may be tempting to categorise Trump's use of witty insults as trolling and/or flaming pure and simple, it is arguably because witty insults such as *kung flu* are so indeterminate and do not neatly fit into any of the categories such as *slurs*, *racial epithets*, or even commonly used *personalised insults* that the targets and multiple audiences alike are unable to come to a clear consensus on what Trump means exactly or even come up with consistent labels for his nicknames or creative insults.

However, it is also intriguing that Trump's use of troll-like behaviour is later picked up by online audiences who in turn use his rhetoric in a variety of behaviours that also straddle the line between trolling and flaming, especially in cases that involve his use of highly personal and offensive creative insults. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Trump's nicknames especially target the most personal and face-sensitive aspects of the people that he attacks including their appearances, families, and

even ethnic backgrounds. Many of his nicknames and insults utilise inter-textual references to popular culture in a fashion that simultaneously (i) represent linguistic creativeness/cleverness on the part of Trump and (ii) attack multiple aspects of the faces of the people/institutions that he is targeting simultaneously. This multifunctionality of Trump's nicknames thus make it difficult to determine what the primary function of the nickname is and what aspect of the person's face is being targeted primarily, or even if there is a primary aspect of their face that is being targeted at all. Metaphorically, these insulting nicknames are akin to 'shotgun blasts' that inflict damage over a wide area as opposed to hitting a precise target. Trump's strategies of insulting people clearly resonate with his social media savvy base of supporters because these insulting nicknames are picked up by them and then later reproduced online. These trolling reproductions of Trump's language come in many forms such as spoof videos, memes, and pro-Trump comments/replies on social media (see Sect. 4.3).⁸ This certainly demonstrates the huge amount of influence that his words have on his supporters, not to mention the contemporary community of American conservative online trolling/flaming community.

Returning to Archer's (2011a, 2015) face aggravation scale mentioned in Chapter 2, we argue that Trump's utterance of *kung flu* is multifunctional in that it serves to build rapport with his base as well as aggravate the face of the Chinese government (or perhaps even the entire nation) in addition to ridiculing his Democratic adversaries. However, while we agree that his use of *kung flu* is utilising 'strategic ambivalence' in order to accommodate multiple functions, it is also evident that this utterance is also much closer to constituting intentional face aggravation/prototypical impoliteness (cf. Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011) than many of the strategically ambivalent examples previously applied to Archer's (2011a) face aggravation scale from court room data, exploitative reality television, police interviews, and professional evaluations.

This utterance is typical of Trump's usage of face-aggravating language because it is extremely difficult to pin-point which function that it serves is the primary one or whether it even has a primary function at all. We suggest labelling these insults such as the *kung flu* nickname as 'thinly veiled spiteful insults' because of the difficulty that one has in zeroing in

⁸ Examples include the *Kung Flu Kid* spoof video that was reposted Don Jr. (see Graziosi 2020b) and various *Kung Flu Panda* memes that were posted on various social media platforms and blog sites.

on the precise implicature and function of these insults besides acknowledging that they impact multiple attributes of the targets in a fashion that is as infuriating to them as it is entertaining to his supporters because of their intertextual references to popular culture, cultural stereotypes, and other similar *clichés*. To accommodate such cases of intentional impoliteness disguised as ambivalent face aggravation we propose placing examples like this in right in the middle of the soft border between the intentional face aggravation area and the strategic ambivalence areas of Archer's scale (see Fig. 4.2).

Arguably the strongest advantage of using this sort of ridiculing/insulting jocular mockery is that it pre-emptively provides that producer with a path to plausible deniability later, should the insult utterance cause controversy in the future. Moreover, we consider the sort of ridiculing that is thinly disguised as jocular mockery as being particularly manipulative and having an extremely strong offensiveness potential because of how difficult it is for the targets of it to reciprocate or respond to it effectively.

Concerning why his supporters find his exploitative reality television-like idiolect so entertaining and humorous in his role as the President of the United States, there are a few factors of humour theory to consider. As

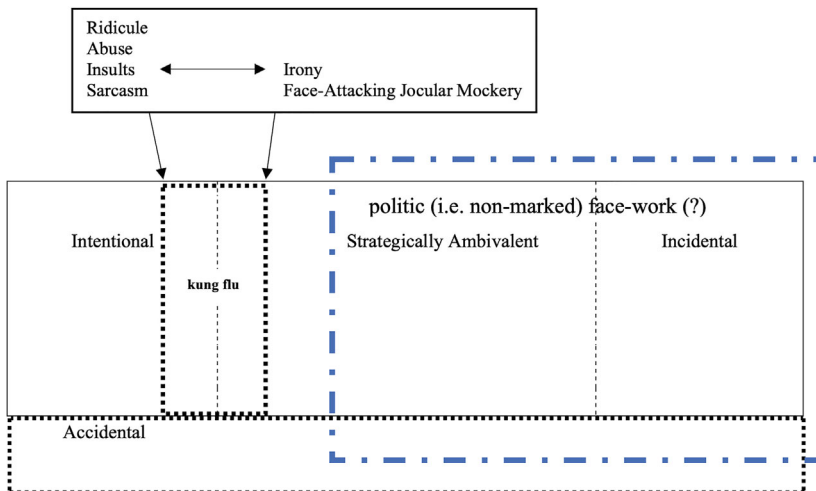


Fig. 4.2 Using Archer's (2011a) face aggravation scale to account for Trump's multifunctional *kung flu* nickname

already mentioned above, Trump's use of his impolite idiolect in political rallies is saliently foregrounded when compared with a traditional politician's performance at a political rally. This makes his creation and use of creative insults like *kung flu* highly incongruent with a typical political rally. In fact, Trump's personal take on a political rally has become such a staple of his personal political brand that both his base of supporters and detractors now expect him to say such brash, hyperbolic, and gratuitously impolite things about his supposed adversaries. Toddington (2015) makes a similar argument in her analysis of the protagonist of the romantic comedy film *As Good as It Gets* (Brooks 1997). The protagonist Melvin Udall, like Trump, is repeatedly seen by the audience to resort to using creative—even poetic at times—impoliteness against people to suit his own egocentric needs. Since the film is self-described as a romantic comedy and because the behaviour of Melvin Udall is so incongruent with what one would typically expect in the numerous activity types in which he is engaged, Toddington (2015: 158) makes the following argument:

[...] by expecting Melvin to be humorous, we are therefore more likely to interpret his impoliteness as funny, or, as Raskin and Attardo (1994: 37) put it, we 'look for the necessary ingredients of the joke in the speaker's utterance'.

However, though this priming towards regarding Trump's impolite language as humorous appears to have taken place for a sizable proportion of the public at large, it does not appear to have worked with everyone. By contrast, his detractors appear to be primed to interpret Trump's impolite utterances as outrageous, bullying, and even bigoted regardless of what he actually says (see discussion of Trump's *bloodbath* comment in Sects. 5.2 and 5.4). In many ways, we argue that both polarised groups are selectively highlighting the aspects that confirm their pre-existing reality paradigms concerning American politics (pro-Republican vs. pro-Democrat) and their schematically held opinions of Trump (i.e. as a saviour vs. as a tyrant).

When it comes to what drives these deeply diverging inferences made about Trump's utterance of *kung flu*, much of essential elements of the debate can be traced back to social and political developments occurring in the United States and abroad for decades prior to his ascension to the presidency in 2016. Due in large part to the democratisation processes of the twentieth century in Western society and the various

social reckonings that came as a result of the civil rights movements occurring from the 1960s, Allan and Burrige (2006: 239) assert in their monograph on taboos that English-speaking societies—Americans included—have shown “a growing apprehensiveness of how to talk to and about ‘women and minorities’”. In the British context for instance, Millwood-Hargrave (2000) noted how racially related slurs such as *niggard* and *paki* experienced huge and rapid shifts upwards in rankings of offensiveness by participants in parallel questionnaire studies from 1997 and 2000. In the United States specifically, Jay (1992: Ch. 5) similarly notes that Americans have been more “attentive” to their use of racial slurs and epithets since social reckonings of the 1960s. Using experimental data in which university students were asked to rank a list of 155 words and behaviours that included themes ranging from aggressive content, sexual content, body functions and body products, racial slurs, and profane/blasphemous language from the *most* offensive (on top) to the *least* offensive (at the bottom), Jay demonstrated that his university student participants generally placed racial slurs in the upper half of their ranked lists.

However, while a consensus among most of society has solidified around the social proscription against using highly conventionalised sexist, ableist, and especially ethnic slurs (e.g. *chink*, *cracker*, *greaser*, *nigger*, *slope*, *spook*, *wop*, and similar), much contention remains in US society concerning how to talk about the face-laden aspects of identity and race/ethnicity particularly. In the American political arena over the past few decades, this area of contention has been characterised within the ‘culture wars’ schema in which the issue of codifying restrictions on language use is central. While attempting to censor language was once primarily seen as a preoccupation of the American political right, Billig noted that this changed from the 2000s because of the American left’s growing insistence on wanting to impose codes on speech that would restrict the use of so-called offensive language that targeted people’s gender, sexuality, physical disabilities, and ethnicities (Billig 2005: Ch. 10). Ironically, according to Billig, this desire to impose a new hegemony on language use put the American left in the undesirable position of appearing like the “old-fashioned”, “stuffy”, and perhaps even “puritanical” parental figure (and we note a similar occurrence in the UK with the rise of the perceived “Nanny State” and “Political Correctness Gone Mad” memes at the same time), while those aligned with the right could more easily adopt the characterisation of the more fun and exciting “naughty-child”

who “can easily adopt the position of being daring rebels, uttering the unutterable, speaking with the frankness of the traditional carnivalesque fool, and transgressing the restrictive codes of respectability” (Billig 2005: 216).

In many ways, the divergent inferences made by Trump’s supporters and detractors mirrors this debate around political correctness that has been brewing in American society for decades. Simply put, some segments of American society think that highlighting the country of origin of a virus is not problematic, nor is giving it a nickname that contains a stereotypical intertextual reference to it. On the other side, another segment of American society found these practices so problematic that many considered the *Chinese virus* epithet to be a racist term and the *kung flu* nickname to be a full-blown racial slur. These stark differences in interpretation lead to two distinct reactions from the two opposing camps. Those who were opposed to his usage of *kung flu* and the *Chinese virus* responded to Trump’s speeches with firm accusations of racism and xenophobia. On the other hand, the pro-Trump camp responded to Trump’s usage of *kung flu* especially with enthusiasm and amusement. They also responded to those who criticised Trump with condescending taunting and ridiculing. This was evident in the analysis of the YouTube data and in the ample amount of *kung flu* themed memes and spoof videos found online.

To conclude this chapter, it is important to point out that to our knowledge, Trump only uttered *kung flu* at the two public occasions analysed here, despite the enthusiastic acceptance that it received from his base of supporters. However, Trump’s end to the moratorium of saying *the Chinese virus* seems to stick following the 20 June rally, and Trump continues to use it to this day when discussing the COVID-19 virus and the pandemic. Though neither Trump nor anyone else in his campaign gave any indication as to why he stopped calling COVID-19 *kung flu*, a likely explanation is that it proved to be too controversial and damaging to his campaign for even him to rationalise the continued use of it. Moreover, while Trump appears to be the first person to call COVID-19 the *Chinese virus* in public, the rumours swirling around the White House hint that *kung flu* may not have been Trump’s own coinage, which may have made him less sentimental about keeping on using it after all the negative attention that it received both in the press and by the general public. Moreover, it is also possible that his campaign team and Republican colleagues pressured him to drop using *kung flu* because of the insistence of many that it constituted a slur or, minimally, racist language

that was helping to stoke hate crimes against Asian Americans and weakening the Republican party's position leading up to the 2020 general election.

In our analysis of the inferences made by the different groups involved in evaluating this controversy, we find that the audiences were not only passively predisposed but also 'cognitively actively predisposed' to make their inferences of the *kung flu* incident based on their own respective reality paradigms, which included pre-established judgements about the type of person Trump was and the way that Trump uses language. This is particularly the case for Trump's supporters. We address this in more detail in Chapter 5.

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Comparison of the Controversies Surrounding Trump's *Bloodbath* Comment with Biden's *Bullseye* Comment

Abstract This chapter compares two controversial utterances from the 2024 US presidential campaign: Donald Trump's *bloodbath* comment, made on 16 March 2024 in Dayton, Ohio, and Joe Biden's *bullseye* remark, uttered during a private donor conference call on 8 July 2024. Both sparked polarised interpretations. Critics alleged incitement to violence while the candidates and their campaign teams argued that these comments were used figuratively. These two case studies reveal stark contrasts. Trump's *bloodbath* comment was overwhelmingly defended by the YouTube commenters as media misrepresentation, while the media was highly critical of Trump's use of language. By contrast, Biden's *bullseye* comment drew strong criticism from Republicans and YouTube commenters, while few Democrats or media outlets came to his defence. The chapter concludes by underscoring how polarised reality paradigms, selective media framing, and audience predispositions shape divergent interpretations.

Keywords Bloodbath · Bullseye · Trump · Biden · Ambiguity · Polarisation · Face aggravation

5.1 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE TRUMP AND BIDEN 2024 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

In this chapter, we expand upon our analysis from Chapter 4 by comparing the two utterances from opposing political candidates that were interpreted in contested fashions and even directly compared to each other by the public during the 2024 presidential race. This involves an in-depth study of Trump’s *bloodbath* comment that he made during a rally in Dayton, Ohio, on 16 March 2024 and the controversy surrounding Biden’s comment about needing to put Trump “in a bullseye” that he made during the private conference call with Democratic donors on 8 July 2024. Before analysing these two separate cases, it is necessary to summarise briefly the events that shaped them. In many ways, all parties involved in the 2024 presidential election—regardless of their party affiliation and beliefs about what transpired—were immensely apprehensive of the *Stop the Steal Insurrection* against the US Capitol Building that attempted to halt the US Congress’s certification of Biden’s victory on 6 January 2021. Ultimately, this insurrection was unsuccessful in its mission. Joe Biden’s victory was certified, and he went on to serve as the 46th President of the United States. The aftermath of this insurrection included the arrests and prosecutions of hundreds of rioters, a congressional investigative committee on the insurrection, and even a formal indictment against Donald Trump who faced four major charges in 2023 (i.e. Conspiracy to defraud the United States; Conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding; Obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding; and Conspiracy against rights; see Duignan 2024). This led to an all-time low in Trump’s approval ratings that was expected to permanently end any possibility of a political comeback.¹ This obviously did not happen. In fact, much of the meta-discourse surrounding how people interpreted the words and motivations surrounding the two contested utterances below from Trump and Biden were informed by the contested evaluations of what transpired during the contentious events surrounding the 6 January insurrection.

Even when compared to the previous two presidential contests in which Trump was also the Republican nominee, 2024 will likely be

¹ However, these charges were formally dropped on 25 November 2024 due to the Justice Department’s policy that prohibits it from prosecuting a sitting president (see Stein and Hsu 2024).

remembered as the most chaotic of all of them because of—most notably—the fact that the incumbent Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, was replaced by Vice President Kamala Harris only a month before the already scheduled Democratic National Convention was to take place and 107 days before election day. Though he not the first incumbent presidential candidate to drop out of their re-election bid, Biden is the first incumbent to withdraw his candidacy after handily winning the primary contests of that election season.² Another unfortunate particularity of this campaign season were the two assassination attempts made against Trump, the first of which resulted in Trump being injured, one crowd member being murdered, and two others being injured (see Looker 2024).

Like the previous two presidential election campaigns, the 2024 political rhetoric from both sides was heated and contentious from the very beginning. For instance, Trump refused to participate in the Republican primary debates but still regularly insulted and ridiculed (see Culpeper 1996) his fellow Republican contenders both on *Truth Social* and during his rallies that were held throughout the Republican primary process.³ In fact, he used a variety of insults (see Bousfield 2008) that targeted the appearances, intelligence/professional abilities, and other sensitive and identificatory aspects of their faces (see Brown and Levinson 1987). Examples of these nicknames against his 2024 Republican primary challengers that target sensitive aspects of face include *Sloppy Chris Christie*, *Meatball Ron* (Ron DeSantis), and *Nimbra/Nimrada* (Nikki Haley) (see Irwin 2023; Pengelly 2023; Wang, Vazquez and Paybarah 2024). After his final contender for the Republican nomination, Nikki Haley, dropped out of the primary contests following Trump's dominance on Super Tuesday on 5 March 2024, controversies surrounding Trump's utterances did not cease. Instead, he turned his attention to other issues and to other people. In addition to the controversy surrounding the ambiguous

² Two Post-Second World War era examples of incumbent candidates dropping out of their re-election bids include Democrats Harry S. Truman in 1952 and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968. However, both of these candidates withdrew their candidacies early in the primary process following weak performances in their respective New Hampshire primary contests (Somasundaram 2024).

³ Trump was banned from Twitter (now X) following the events of the January 6 insurrection. However, his account was reactivated on 19 November 2022, after Elon Musk acquired the company. However, Trump did not start using Twitter again for almost a year after that, starting on 24 August 2023.

threat/prediction in March concerning a “bloodbath” that would ensue should he not get elected in November, other controversial utterances included various fascist inspired terminology that he used to describe illegal immigrants—e.g. calling them “vermin” and stating that they were “poisoning the blood” of the nation (see Astor 2024)—unsubstantiated claims that Haitian asylum speakers were eating house pets in Springfield, Ohio (see Bort et al. 2024), and bizarre references to Hannibal Lecter, a fictional character that is perhaps most widely known from the film adaptation of one of Thomas Harris’ books, *The Silence of the Lambs* (Klee 2024)—just to name a few.⁴ However, such controversial utterances from Republicans were not confined to Trump only. JD Vance, his running mate and eventual Vice President, also faced criticism for a resurfaced portion of an interview in which he stated that the country—and at the time the Democratic party—was run by “childless cat ladies”. Though Vance later subsequently attempted to minimise this comment as a *joke* or a “sarcastic remark” (see Pengelly 2024), this insult became a focal point of criticism levelled against Vance throughout the campaign and the *childless cat lady* insult was even reappropriated by many women on social media—musician Taylor Swift being among the most notable of them.⁵

However, it was not only Republicans who faced criticisms for using problematic and impolite language behaviours. While he was the presumptive Democratic nominee, Biden publicly insulted Trump regularly in his speeches, interviews, and at campaign events—frequently calling him a “loser”, “whiner”, and a “felon” (all of which would count as *dysphemisms* (see Bousfield 2007b), among other things (see Richards and Perlmutter-Gumbiner 2024). After Biden dropped out of the race, Vice President Kamala Harris’ campaign team continued to insult and ridicule Trump and his team. Harris herself used numerous insults and other forms of ridicule (i.e. trolling-like taunts) that commented on the small size of the crowds at Trump’s rallies. However, many of the

⁴ The references to Hannibal Lecter were brought up when Trump made the claim that people from “insane asylums” were crossing the border illegally. The message seems to be that people like Hannibal Lecter are crossing illegally into the US. However, this is confused by all the compliments that Trump makes in regard to this character.

⁵ Taylor Swift’s now famous Instagram post in which she signed off as “Childless Cat Lady” can be viewed in its entirety here: https://www.instagram.com/taylorswift/p/C_wtAOKOW1z/?hl=en

more aggressive insults and ridiculing messages came from men working with her campaign, of which there are too many examples in existence to analyse in detail here (see Bort et al. 2024). Some notable examples, however, came from Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, Harris' running mate, early in the campaign reshuffle. In particular, Walz called MAGA Republicans "creepy" and "weird as hell", and he repeated via implicature (via flouts of the maxim(s) of *quality* and arguably *manner*) the false claim that Vance had a sexual experience with a couch. Former President Barak Obama also engaged in similar impoliteness strategies when he implied (via a gestural flout of the maxim of *manner*) that Trump has small genitals during his speech at the Democratic National Convention in August 2024. However, this trend of *ad hominem* attacks ridiculing and mocking Trump by the Harris campaign was short lived, and it is noteworthy that Harris' campaign shifted the messaging focus away from insulting and ridiculing both Trump and other MAGA Republicans later in the campaign. On the contrary, Trump's campaign continued to use aggressive and starkly impolite rhetoric against Harris and anyone else considered a foe leading up to election day in what could be considered trademark and consistent use of *ad hominem* or *ad feminam* attacks.

However, this chapter is not focusing on how the 2024 candidates engaged in gratuitous face-attack against each other. Instead, this chapter concentrates on two utterances that have been both directly characterised as inciting violence by some and minimised as harmless or even simply campaign hyperbole by others. Such is the nature of the contested interpretations and the narratives around them. Coincidentally, the two utterances that we have selected for analysis here have been directly compared to each other precisely because:

- (a) The fact that ambiguous/metaphorical language is used in each utterance,
- (b) Their characterisations by some that they incite violence and the insistence of the speakers and others that they do not, and
- (c) Trump and Biden are both known for speaking 'off the cuff' and are frequently criticised for saying controversial things.

We have elected to not include an additional case study involving Harris' political rhetoric because no comparable utterance was made by

her that triggered any similar controversy involving the use of (potentially) ambiguous language that brought about accusations of inciting violence or anything similar. The rest of this chapter therefore addresses Trump's *bloodbath* comment and Biden's *bullseye* comment. 5.2 provides the analysis of Trump's supposed *bloodbath* threat from his Dayton, Ohio, Rally on 16 March 2024, and 5.2 analyses Biden's controversial *bullseye* comment from a conference call with Democratic donors on 8 July 2024. We then give a final discussion and compare the similarities and differences between these two controversies in 5.4 and end it with some observations about the pragmaticognitive implications involved in the differencing reality paradigms of the dichotomous political groupings of the American electorate based in part on their audience positioning.

5.2 TRUMP'S *BLOODBATH* PREDICTION/ THREAT IN DAYTON, OHIO, ON 16 MARCH 2024

Though only one of a long list of controversial utterances made by Trump during the 2024 election campaign season, Trump's apparent and alleged threat that there would be "a bloodbath" in the event of him not winning the election was taken extremely seriously by both Biden's and Harris' campaigns, and it was repeated by them throughout the lead-up to election day as an indicator of Trump's perceived character flaws and his alleged unfitness to be re-elected for a second term. Strictly speaking, this rally was billed as an endorsement for Bernie Moreno, the Republican candidate for one of Ohio's US Senate seats.⁶ While much of the news coverage of this segment of his 16 March rally speech begins by quoting Trump from around the point when he states, "Now if I don't get elected, it's gonna be a bloodbath [...]", the utterance itself was made while he discussed his intention to impose a 100% tariff on foreign-made cars. Considering that Ohio is one of the top car-manufacturing states in the US, this comment could easily be seen as pandering to the local Ohio crowd, his 'intended audience' (see Sect. 2.3.1, Figure 2.1). This is apparently clear from the wider co-text provided in the quotation provided below:

⁶ Bernie Moreno went on to win this seat during in the November general election.

Trump: We're gonna put a 100% tariff on every single car [APPLAUS] that comes across the line. And you're not going to be able to sell those cars – if I get elected. Now if I don't get elected, it's going to be a bloodbath for the whole [A FEW INDIVIDUALS SHOUT RESPONSES] that's gonna be the least of it. It's gonna be a bloodbath for the country. That'll be the least of it.
(Trump Rally at Dayton, Ohio, on 16.03.2024)⁷

Interestingly, the *bloodbath* utterance did not get much of a response from the crowd at all, particularly compared to the enthusiastic response to his promise to impose a 100% tariff on foreign-made cars that he made right before his threat/prediction of a *bloodbath*. This lack of a response from the crowd, as his intended audience, is also evident visually, as is demonstrated in Fig. 5.1.

The point to be made here is that the present and intended audience's response to Trump's *bloodbath* comment was incredibly muted (beyond a small number of individuals shouting words which were not picked up by the microphones). This is contrasted against their response



Fig. 5.1 Trump and the crowd at the moment he says “*bloodbath*” at the Dayton, Ohio, rally on 16.03.2024 at 31 minutes and 54 seconds into the speech

⁷ To watch the entire rally, see The Times and The Sunday Times (2024). The *bloodbath* comment can be found at time marker 31:40-32:00.



Fig. 5.2 Trump and the crowd at the moment that he promises to impose a 100% tariff on foreign-made cars at the Dayton, Ohio, rally on 16.03.2024 at 31 minutes and 45 seconds into the speech

to Trump's promise to introduce tariffs on foreign-manufactured cars, as seen in Fig. 5.2

At this point, as can be seen in image 5.2, the audience members clap, raise their hands in the air in gestures of agreement, and make vocalisations of support for Trump's promise to impose 100% tariffs on foreign-made cars. The emotional response to the promise of tariffs far outstrips the response to Trump's claims of a *bloodbath* if he were not to be elected in November.

In a similar manner to what we observed with the *kung flu* controversy, Trump's words and how to interpret them became a top news story immediately following the completion of the rally, as his 'ancillary' audience (in this case the journalists) picked up his words and communicated them to the 'extended' audience (see Sect. 2.3.1, Figure 2.1). While journalists quickly approached the Trump campaign seeking clarification on what he meant by using *bloodbath*, the Biden campaign team and other top Democratic leaders such as former Speaker Nancy Pelosi quickly inserted themselves into the discussion and argued that *bloodbath* was meant literally as a threat of another violent insurrection citing as a precedent the January 6th riots in 2021 that followed an inflammatory speech given by Trump urging his supporters to "stop the steal" (CBS News 2024). The Biden team took this further and seized the opportunity to use a clip of Trump's *bloodbath* comment in a digital campaign advertisement that compared this incident to other cases in which his rhetoric

was arguably linked to inciting violence from far-right groups in the past (Doherty 2024). In contrast, the Trump campaign responded by stating that he was talking about an “economic bloodbath” that would result from an increase in imports of foreign-made cars. Furthermore, Jason Miller, senior adviser for the Trump campaign, added that “any reporter that falls for this Biden camp spin is stupid” (CBS News 2024), thus further enforcing a preferred interpretation of Trump’s words. Trump’s own reaction to the news coverage and the interpretation made by Biden and his team was similarly aggressive and face aggravating, as can be viewed in his *Truth Social* post from 18 March 2024 (see Fig. 5.3).

As we can see, Trump is *criticising* (Bousfield 2008) both the alternate interpretation of his use of *bloodbath* and his opponent, Joe Biden, in a clear *ad hominem* attack with the presuppositional use of “crooked” to pre-qualify ‘Biden’. Trump appears to be *criticising* in response to *criticisms* he himself faced.

Indeed, as the criticisms about his rhetoric in general and his use of *bloodbath* in particular continued following the rally, Trump himself continued to ridicule those who argued that he used *bloodbath* in the

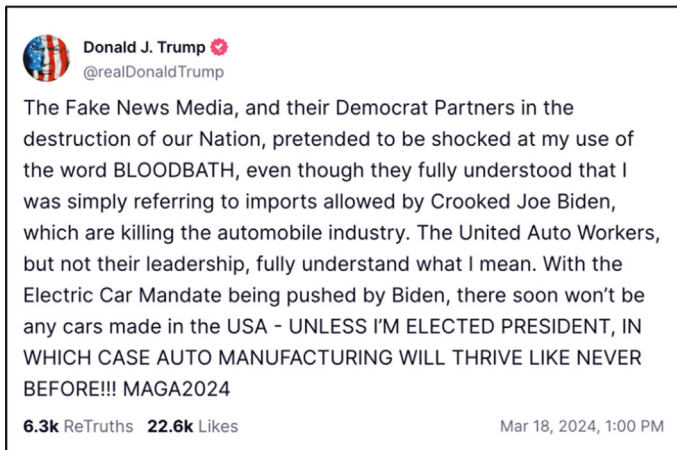


Fig. 5.3 Trump’s reaction to the *bloodbath* coverage on Truth Social⁸

⁸ A link to this Truth Social post can be found here: <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/112116580305482725>

literal sense that incited violence. He even took it a step further by taking advantage of the controversy for fundraising purposes. He asserted in fundraising e-mails that his political opponents and the mainstream press had intentionally and “viciously” misquoted him in order to hurt his campaign (Carlson, Kim and Ibssa 2024). Furthermore, he continued to use *bloodbath* at his rallies, seemingly to make a series of points about its usage. A notable example of this occurred on 2 April at a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Trump accused President Biden of being the perpetrator of a “bloodbath” of crime that was allegedly unleashed upon the southern border regions of the United States by illegal immigrants who managed to enter the country because of Biden’s alleged mishandling of the US-Mexico border (Cappelletti, Gomez Licon, and Colvin 2024). This assertion was later expanded in the creation of a pro-Trump website called “Biden Bloodbath” that gave a timeline of the then-current US land border crises and argued that Biden’s policies were responsible for a rise in violent and drug-related crimes along the area of the country straddling the US-Mexico border.⁹

Moreover, at the Grand Rapids rally, Trump’s podium was also adorned with the message “Stop Biden’s Border Bloodbath” (see Layne, Slattery and Reid 2014) which is a ‘speech act’ of an implied directive against a presupposition. The presupposition is encoded in the phrase “Biden’s Border Bloodbath” which presupposes the existence of a bloodbath relating to the border; the phrase itself is also a poetic phrase employing alliteration of the /b/ phoneme to present an unexpected regularity in language and hence, it is foregrounded. The use of the presuppositional trigger “stop” is also as noted, an implied directive in ‘speech act’ terms. In short, it is a directive as it is demanding or directing the addressees (intended, being those supporting Trump and his policies) to action, this action being the implicature (via flouts of Grice’s 1975 maxims of *manner* and possibly *relation*) that they must vote for Trump in order to achieve the “stop” of the presupposed “...border bloodbath”.

Similarly, and concerning the Democratic candidates, both Biden and Harris continued to repeat Trump’s words against him on the campaign trail by using it as evidence that he intended to organise another coup

⁹ This website, first called *BidenBloodbath.com* and then later changed to *kamal-aborderbloodbath.com* has since been deactivated following the completion of the election. However, parts of it are still viewable via the North Carolina RNC affiliate website: https://www.nc.gop/rnc_launches_bidenbloodbath_com

against the federal government should he lose the election, as they repeatedly asserted that he did in 2020. It is notable that both Biden and Harris made this point during each of their respected debates against Trump in June and September. Similar criticisms were levelled against Trump by countless other Democratic and even some Republican leaders and campaigners during the 2024 election season (Cohen 2024). Concerning how non-politicians and non-journalists reacted to Trump's *bloodbath* comment, this is addressed in detail in Sect. 5.2.1 via the analysis of our sample of YouTube video comments taken from a clip of the *bloodbath* comment found on NBC's *Today Show* YouTube channel.

From our standpoint as researchers, we argue that Trump's *bloodbath* message is indeed ambiguous, though one could use supporting evidence to support either interpretation. However, the stance taken by Trump and his supporters who ridiculed anyone who argued that he was threatening violence in the event he lost are conveniently overlooking certain aspects of his speech. Though it is also plausible that Trump was talking about an economic bloodbath for the car industry, it is important to note what he actually said. In the speech itself, it is notable that Trump did not explicitly state that there would be an economic bloodbath if he would not be elected. Instead, he states simply that there would be a "bloodbath". Moreover, he also extends the scope of this predicted *bloodbath* to the country as a whole and not the automotive industry only, as we can verify in his words below:

Now if I don't get elected, it's going to be a bloodbath for the whole [A FEW INDIVIDUALS SHOUT RESPONSES] that's gonna be the least of it. It's gonna be a bloodbath for the country. That'll be the least of it.
(Trump Rally at Dayton, Ohio, on 16.03.2024)

Additionally, roughly 18 minutes later in his speech Trump made another dire prediction about the consequences of him not winning the election that also lends support to the interpretation that he could have been advocating for another violent insurrection. In this portion of the speech, Trump says, "If this election isn't won, I'm not sure that you'll ever have another election in this country". Such rhetoric and dire threats/predictions carry many similarities to Trump's speech on January 6th that immediately preceded the storming of the US Capitol Building. Therefore, Trump's previous conduct and his hyperbolically and emotionally charged rhetoric at the rally in Dayton, Ohio, does lend

some credibility to the interpretation that Trump’s *bloodbath* comment could have been a threat of violence in the event that he did not win the election.

5.2.1 *Comment Analysis of 100 Comments from the Bloodbath Video*

To gauge how non-politicians and non-journalists reacted to and interpreted Trump’s utterance of *bloodbath* at the rally at Dayton, Ohio, we analysed the top (most liked) 100 comments found on a news video reporting specifically on Trump’s utterance. This video is featured on NBC’s *Today Show* YouTube channel and is titled “Trump says there will be a ‘bloodbath’ if he isn’t re-elected” (2024). At the time of the extraction of the data, this video had received 301 thousand views, 2.4 thousand *likes*, and 26 thousand *dislikes*. Looking at the top 100 comments of the video’s then total of 4,788 comments, this comment analysis exhibits more of a one-sided picture than what we observed with the *kung flu* video comments, which was more varied. The presentation of the comment category types in Table 5.1 makes this difference clear.

First to note is that the comments in this sample are heavily skewed in favour of defending Trump and his utterance of *bloodbath*, particularly via criticisms of NBC’s *Today Show* and of mainstream media in general. Among these 92 comments, 81 of them target the perceived or alleged ‘dishonesty’ of the mainstream media. These 81 comments can be further broken down into the following categories:

- The mainstream media is manipulative (41)
- The mainstream media lies/is lying (23)
- The conduct of mainstream media outlets is criminal (9)

Table 5.1 Comment analysis of top 100 comments from the *bloodbath* video

<i>Types of responses</i>	<i>Frequency (out of 100)</i>
Critical of the media’s anti-Trump bias	92
Critical of Trump	3
Neutral	3
Discussing something else	2
Total	100

- Mainstream media journalists are stupid/idiots (8)

The remaining 11 comments include 3 that accuse the Democrats of intentionally perpetuating the false interpretation of Trump’s *bloodbath* comment as well as 8 comments that explicitly set out to “correct” the media in terms of interpretation. This includes arguing that his words were taken out of context, providing definitions of *bloodbath* that minimise its violent connotations, or arguing that the reported phrasing (including in the title of the YouTube video) is “incorrect”. Of particular interest to this investigation, two of these comments explicitly argue that the definition of *bloodbath* is a purely economic term, thus completely dismissing usage of this term related to physical violence, despite the fact “widespread physical violence” is consistently listed as the first definition of it in any major dictionary. As such, the propensity for interpretations to create a version of reality that is starkly at odds with wider accepted and authoritative understandings should not be underestimated (see Bousfield and Lunan-Taylor 2026). Furthermore, an additional two of these comments falsely accuse the mainstream media of inaccurately reporting what Trump said. One comment falsely claims that Trump actually said “economic bloodbath” while another claims that Trump actually said “a bloodbath for the automotive industry” before the media bleeped out the prepositional phrase at the end. Both claims are patently untrue as the audio-visually recorded video attests. Such cases of selective defining or even blatantly and falsely amending what was said in order to paint Trump in a more positive light provides further vital evidence that supports our initial observations from Chapter 4 about the susceptibility of members of polarised groups, particularly in this case those who are enthusiastic supporters of Trump, to become ‘cognitively actively predisposed’ to base their inferences of Trump’s language on their pre-established positive judgements about the type of person they take Trump to be and their mistrust and cynicism about the (alleged, hidden) motivations of the ‘mainstream media’ and the Democrats. In effect, referring to the argument we made above regarding reality paradigms, those who wilfully invent reasons or ‘facts’ about Trump which are demonstrably untrue appear to do so because they want to believe what they are saying about him and his actions. Furthermore, they do not want to believe or engage with the problematic alternatives, even when presented with arguably robust evidence.

These findings are even more powerful because this selective editing and retroactive amending of Trump’s language is done despite the fact that there are multiple recordings of this rally made available by numerous news organisations including outlets that are conservative/Republican leaning. This issue is discussed and explored in more detail in Sect. 5.4.

A second major difference between this comment sample and the one covering Trump’s *kung flu* comment involves the content of the comments that defend Trump’s supposed threat of a *bloodbath* occurring should he not be elected. As opposed to the pro-Trump commenters in the *kung flu video* who made numerous comments about how “funny and entertaining” Trump was, discussions of Trump’s entertaining persona or the cleverness/humorous nature of his choice of words are markedly absent in the comment samples of the *bloodbath* video. In one of the rare comments that addresses Trump’s idiolect, it is ironically stated that Trump speaks in “hyperbole” sometimes because it is, in fact, “legal to talk” in the USA.

Perhaps most surprisingly, only a miniscule 3 of the top 100 comments evaluate Trump’s utterance critically. Moreover, only one of those three comments brings up the events of 6 January 2021, as shown in the comment below which is a paraphrase of the original.

Considering what happened at the capital, it’s easy to assume what he’s talking about, especially out of context.

The usage of both “assume” and “out of context” suggest that even this comment, which we have identified as negative, may itself be interpreted as excusatory of Trump’s comments, and hence may well be more neutral in interpretation as a critique of Trump.

Concerning the 3 definitively more neutral comments, they were among the few that expressed an ironic or humorous interpretation of the situation, particularly relating to the reaction of the press. We provide paraphrases of these three comments below:

- The mainstream media constantly forces me to reevaluate him, despite me often being convinced that he’s a phony.
- I went to the grocery store today. It was a bloodbath..haha!
- Haha. It’s Saturday Night Pro Wrestling-like talk used in politics. Don’t be alarmed, people!

The most intriguing find from this comment analysis is that the near unanimous acceptance of the interpretation that Trump was talking about an ‘economic bloodbath’ concerning the automotive industry and not about another potential insurrection in the streets. Potential explanations for this more skewed reaction from the YouTube commenters could stem from the fact that *bloodbath* is commonly used in a metaphorical sense in both political and economic contexts, as explained in one of the sub-categories of the second definition of *bloodbath* found in the Merriam-Webster English Dictionary (2024a). This suggests that many audiences of Trump’s rhetoric automatically select the interpretation of Trump’s ambiguous language that fits their pre-existing understanding of him as a public figure, and thus they are ‘cognitively actively predisposed’ towards interpretations of his actions and behaviours which are more positive (or negative as was the case with the press and Democratic figures), and which more closely align with their reality paradigms. There are also some who process Trump in a “piecemeal fashion” (see Culpeper 2001: 96–99). Both approaches rely on pre-existing schemata albeit with different saliences, and the latter are therefore more open to interpreting his utterances individually—whether they like him as a politician or not—rather than consistently seeing him positively (or indeed negatively) largely irrespective of what he says or does.

To conclude this section, while the top commenters seemed to be in agreement in interpreting Trump’s utterance of *bloodbath* in the hyperbolic sense, the American mainstream press along with multiple high-level Democrats including Biden, Harris, and former House Leader Nancy Pelosi interpreted Trump’s utterance of *bloodbath* more literally and explicitly referenced the events of 6 January 2021, as ‘evidence’ of Trump’s true intentions. Intriguingly, this utterance does not appear to have been used with humorous intent like we saw in the previous case study in Chapter 4. However, similarly to his utterance of *kung flu*, numerous people, including the quote from one of the commenters above, pointed to the plausibility that his use of it was hyperbolic, referencing Trump’s history of relying on hyperbolic language over his adult life.¹⁰

¹⁰ Click the provided link to observe one Fox News talk-show host describing Trump’s rhetoric as regularly containing “bombastic hyperbole”: <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6349149703112>

5.3 BIDEN’S “IT’S TIME TO PUT TRUMP IN A BULLSEYE” CONTROVERSY, 8 JULY 2024

To fully comprehend the context around the controversial utterance concerning Biden that we observe in this second part of this chapter that it is first necessary to give a brief summary of the 28 chaotic days that separated Biden’s disappointing performance in his first and only debate on 27 June 2024 and his withdrawal from the presidential race at the end of July. Proving or demonstrating that his age and mental stamina were not an issue was already Biden’s biggest challenge coming into the 2024 presidential race, but this issue became more pressing for him after his debate performance against Trump. During this debate, it was noted that in addition to looking visibly exhausted and speaking *sotto voce* throughout the debate, he also stuttered, lost his train of thought, and mixed-up key terminology repeatedly (Zurcher 2024). Though Biden’s energy and demeanour improved in the second half of the debate, this was considerably overlooked by journalists and social media personalities who instead concentrated their attention on the oft repeated clips from the first half of the debate in which Biden lost his train of thought and finished sentences in nonsensical fashions, including the exchange provided below:

Biden: [...] [SOTTO VOCE] and I’m going to continue to move until we get the total ban on the the the total initiative uh relative to what we can do with more border patrol and more Asylum officers.

Moderator: President Trump?

Trump: [SHAKING HEAD] I really don’t know what he said at the end of that sentence, I don’t think he knows what he said either.
(Biden and Trump Debate, 27.06.2024)¹¹

In the days following the debate, Biden faced increasing pressure to drop out of the race in favour of a younger Democratic contender that ultimately resulted in his withdrawal and immediate endorsement of his Vice President Kamala Harris on 21 July 2024. It was towards the end of this 28-day period that discussions around what constitutes *inflammatory rhetoric* became a focal point of the presidential race once again following what was the first of two assassination attempts

¹¹ A transcript of the debate in its entirety can be viewed on the *American Presidency Project* website: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-debate-atlanta-georgia>

made against Trump during this campaign season on 13 June 2024 in Butler Pennsylvania.¹² Central to this rehashed discussion were comments made by President Biden five days before the assassination attempt on Trump. These comments were made during a private conference call with hundreds of Democratic donors concerning his insistence to stay in the 2024 presidential race, despite concerns raised by many that his poor debate performance made a path to victory for him untenable. Following the assassination attempt, much attention was given to a short quotation from the conversation. The text that received the bulk of the scrutiny includes the excerpt provided below:

“We need to move forward. Look, we have roughly 40 days ’til the convention, 120 days til the election. We can’t waste any more time being distracted,” Biden said in a private call with donors Monday, according to a recording obtained by POLITICO.

“I have one job, and that’s to beat Donald Trump. I’m absolutely certain I’m the best person to be able to do that. So, we’re done talking about the debate, it’s time to put Trump in a bullseye,” Biden said.

(Summary of Biden conference call on 08.07.2024, see Ferris and Schneider 2024)

Though the *bullseye* comment did not receive any notable criticism at the time of its initial reporting on 8 July 2024, this quote *retroactively* received increased attention and criticism from Republican politicians after the assassination attempt against Trump on July 13th. These figures blamed Biden’s *bullseye* comment and the rhetoric of other Democrats for inciting violence against Trump and thus encouraging the actions of Thomas Crooks, the man who allegedly attempted to assassinate Trump and who murdered one crowd member and injured two others in Butler, Pennsylvania (Looker 2024). Critics of Biden’s choice of phrase include figures such as Georgia Congressman Mike Collins, Senator Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, Congresswoman Lauren Boebert of Colorado, and Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia.

On the other hand, Biden insisted that he used *bullseye* figuratively but never-the-less expressed regret for using the term in an interview with Lester Holt (2024) of NBC News on July 15th, in light of the attack at the Butler rally. However, Biden rejected the notion that his use of *bullseye*

¹² See Ramírez (2024) for a summary of this tumultuous 28-day period.

was inflammatory or incited violence. Instead, he spent most of the interview arguing that Trump's language was much more problematic and even used Trump's *bloodbath* utterance from March 16th as one example of this. He also referenced Trump's allegedly inflammatory speech right before the January 6th riots.

In fact, though *bloodbath* and *bullseye* are indeed similar in that they are both commonly used figuratively in political and other contexts, the contexts of the two utterances as well as the retroactive reactions given by both politicians are quite different. First, while Trump's utterance was given at a televised public rally that was made available for anyone to watch live or via a recording, Biden's comment was made during a private conference call from which only selected quotations were published in an exclusive article from *Politico*, a political news website. The quoted segment of the conference call that people cite as a call to assassinate Trump instead addresses concerns about Biden's debate performance and his insistence that he was the person best able to defeat Trump in the presidential election. Moreover, if one reads the *Politico* article in its entirety, there are additional excerpts that further support the interpretation that Biden was using *bullseye* metaphorically with the meaning "to focus on something". For instance, in the quote below, Biden suggests the following:

Instead of airing public concerns about his campaign, Biden argued the party should be directing its ire at Trump, who he said has "gotten away with doing nothing for the last 10 days except driving around in his golf cart, bragging about scores he doesn't score." He said Democrats needed to focus on what Trump would do to abortion rights, Medicare, Social Security, and prescription drug prices.

(Summary of Biden conference call on 08.07.2024, see Ferris and Schneider 2024)

In addition to these contextual details supporting the non-violent intended meaning of *bullseye*, the fact that Biden's *bullseye* comment was made in a private 'backstage' political interaction with top-level Democratic donors also makes the accusation that Biden is directly responsible for inciting the public to commit violence against Trump even more problematic (see Mullany's 2011 discussion of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' political activities).

A further difference in the context comes from the individual personas and reputations of the two speakers themselves. Trump's fiery speech immediately preceding the January 6th riots does indeed provide a precedent that can be used to support the idea that his rhetoric is potentially inflammatory and capable of inciting political violence among his supporters, regardless of his personal intentions. Contrarily, there are no instances on record that suggest that any of Biden's speeches before July 2024 incited anyone to commit a violent act on his behalf. Moreover, no direct links between Biden's rhetoric and the rhetoric of any individual for that matter have been found to have influenced or incited Thomas Crooks to act. In fact, investigators are yet to have identified any ideology that drove this individual's activity, and their current investigations indicate that he had also considered targeting a Biden rally before deciding to attempt to assassinate Trump in Butler (Lucas 2024). The final major difference between these two controversial utterances stems from the fact that only one of the politicians took mitigating action after being accused of using language with a violent connotation or interpretation. Biden expressed regret for using the noun *bullseye* by stating that it was a "mistake" to use that term, and he did not use it thereafter in his public speaking, as would be typical in a traditional political talk scandal (see Ekström and Johansson 2019). In opposition to this, Trump and his campaign team reacted defiantly to the *bloodbath* controversy. Not only did Trump publicly insist that his political opponents and the mainstream press had "viciously" misquoted him in order to hurt his campaign (Carlson, Kim, and Ibssa 2024), he also did not appear to attempt to mitigate the effects of his controversial utterance, nor did he offer an apology or a retraction. Moreover, as mentioned in 5.2, Trump continued using *bloodbath* in the months that followed his rally in Dayton and even used it at his rallies in new contexts outside of the automotive industry. In fact, he further expanded its use by using it against Biden and later Harris within the context of their alleged poor handling of the US-Mexico border crises (Habeshian 2024). Having sufficiently discussed how politicians and the press reacted to Biden's *bullseye* comment, we next investigate how other groups interpreted and reacted to it. As before, we explore this via the analysis of a sample of comments found under an official news video posted to YouTube by a professional news outlet.

5.3.1 *Comment Analysis of 100 Comments from the Biden’s Bullseye Video*

As Biden’s *bullseye* comment was made during a private conference call, there is no video or audio recording of it publicly available. The only evidence of the original utterance publicly available can be found in the quotations found in print. However, following the media storm that broke after the shooting in Butler, Pennsylvania, Biden was asked about his *bullseye* comment during an interview with Lester Holt of NBC news on July 15th. As this is the only occasion in which Biden addressed this controversy in detail, we have chosen to use a clip of this interview that is available on the YouTube channel of NBC News. It is entitled “Biden: ‘It was a mistake’ to use ‘bull’s-eye’ in remarks about Trump” (NBC News 2024). At the time of data extraction, this video had received 392 thousand views and received approximately 3 thousand *likes* and 8.5 thousand *dislikes* and approximately 4.5 thousand comments. This clip entails Holt asking Biden what he meant in using the term *bullseye* and Biden’s response through which he states that he was talking about “focusing on” Trump, as well as his expression of regret for using that precise terminology.

As in our other comment sample analyses, we looked at the top 100 (most liked) comments found under the video itself. As Table 5.2 indicates, reactions of the YouTube commenters to Biden’s explanation presents a converse picture to what we observed in the comments of Trump’s *bloodbath* video. The comments are heavily critical of Biden and his use of the phrase “it’s time to put Trump in a bullseye”. This can be observed in the three examples that we have paraphrased below:

- What a liar! After that he goes right back into his vicious comments and nonsense about bullseye. His hatred is out of control.
- They twist everything to fit their own narrative. Biden is so out of it that he cannot even put a full sentence together.
- Crosshair is more incriminating than bullseye. Imagine if Trump had tried to walk back saying this?

In fact, 76 of the comments express blatantly anti-Biden messages, which can be further broken down into the following categories:

Table 5.2 Comment analysis of top 100 comments from the Biden’s *bullseye* video

<i>Types of comments</i>	<i>Frequency (out of 100)</i>
Anti-Biden	76
Critical of the media (Pro-Trump)	15
Neutral/unclear	6
Unrelated: “America is a republic, not a democracy”	3
Total	100

- Making fun of Biden personally, especially what he says and his age (40)
- Attacking Biden’s record as president (25)
- Blaming Biden for the shooting at Butler, Pennsylvania (4)
- Implying that the media is unfairly biased in favour of Biden (4)
- Arguing that Biden’s *bullseye* controversy highlights the hypocrisy that exists regarding how he and Trump are treated by the media and by other politicians (3)

The second biggest category is pro-Trump in its messaging and consists of 15 comments that express a distaste for how Trump is treated by the mainstream media and/or expressing an appreciation of Trump. The third category entails messages with neutral or unclear messages regarding their evaluations of Biden’s *bullseye* utterance and his explanation of what he meant. The neutral/unclear category can be broken down into the following sub-categories:

- Discussing definitions of *bullseye* (2)
- Commenting about the media (2)
- Comparing this controversy with the *bloodbath* controversy (1)
- Biden Quote—Evaluation unclear (1)

This category of neutral/unclear comments is interesting because it is the only one that contains examples that express scepticism that Biden’s *bullseye* remark was a “call to violence”, though it is also notable that none of them come out and explicitly defend or positively evaluate Biden either. One such comment asserts that the media was now doing the same the same thing to Biden that they did to Trump back in March, while another

criticises the way in which certain segments of society are reacting to this and other political talk scandals. This is shown in paraphrases of these comments below:

- These are the same people who cried about Trump saying “blood-bath” when he was talking about what would happen to the automotive industry
- Looks like he’s now being targeted by the media.

The neutral/unclear category also contains 2 comments that provide definitions of *bullseye*, though their views on whether Biden’s use of it is incriminating or not is not clear in these cases. One claims that *bullseye* means “a target and not a focus”, while the other argues that a *crosshair* is what you look through and the *bullseye* is what you hit.

The final category is a small grouping of 3 comments that do not address the *bullseye* controversy at all but interestingly take issue with Biden’s description of the United States as a democracy. Two of them insist that the United States is a constitutional republic and not a democracy while another defines the US government as a “two-party dictatorship”.¹³ While the commenters who stress the distinction between a democracy and the constitutional republic appear to be anti-Democrat in their political allegiances, the allegiance of the commenter who calls the United States a two-party dictatorship is unclear.

Our analysis of these comments demonstrates that the YouTube commenting community is heavily skewed in evaluating Biden and the controversy surrounding his *bullseye* comment negatively and heavily skewed in evaluating Trump and the controversy surrounding his *blood-bath* comment positively. Indeed, in both comment analyses, the YouTube commenters appeared to only focus on the definitions that seemed relevant to them while all other possible definitions were left out. Moreover, in direct contrast to what we observed in the comments concerning Trump’s *bloodbath* controversy, there was not a single comment that unambiguously defended Biden against the criticisms levelled against him, nor did anyone express admiration for him. The general consensus of this comment analysis is that the commenters analysed above generally

¹³ One comment that was categorised as anti-Biden also stresses that the United States is a republic and not a democracy, though it first stresses that Biden’s language was indeed incendiary and incriminating.

like Trump, dislike Biden (and all other Democrats), and dislike/do not trust mainstream media news outlets. In fact, six comments in our sample specifically criticise mainstream media by name, one accuses NBC of trying to “cover up” and assist Biden, and four comments specifically attack the credibility of the interviewer, Lester Holt.

The results of these two comment analyses of the *bloodbath* controversy and the *bullseye* controversy, lead us to argue that the communities of commenters who engaged with both of these videos were likely composed of similar demographics. We address the issues surrounding the demographics of active YouTube commenters in more detail in 5.4.

5.4 COMPARISON AND DIFFERENTIATION OF *BLOODBATH* AND *BULLSEYE* CONTROVERSIES

While the first case study in Chapter 4 highlighted how Trump could use impolite humorous nicknames (i.e. *kung flu*) to both ridicule his political adversaries and manufacture rapport with his base of supporters, this chapter shows how he can do this using non-humorous formulae as well. In this case, it entailed the threat/prediction, “If I don’t get elected, it’s going to be a bloodbath.” Like we saw with the *kung flu* utterance, *bloodbath* is used in an ambiguous manner at this rally which opened the door for multiple conflicting yet plausible interpretations of Trump’s intended meaning among the different groups. On one hand, if one listens to the surrounding speech immediately preceding his utterance of *bloodbath*, the interpretation that he was talking about an ‘economic bloodbath’ should his counterpart win the election is plausible. It is indeed the case that he was talking about his intention to protect the American auto industry from the supposed threat of cheap Chinese vehicle imports. However, the more literal interpretation concerning a threat of violence in the streets should he not be elected is also plausible for the reasons discussed in 5.2.

The controversy surrounding Biden’s *bullseye* comment is quite different from Trump’s *bloodbath* controversy in that it did not cause any outrage upon its initial reporting, but instead only gained traction in the news cycle in the days following the assassination attempt against Trump when a handful of Republican figures accused Biden’s words of inciting violence against him. Going back to the original quote from the conference call, there is little evidence to support that Biden was advocating the assassination of Trump or any violent acts at all.

Moreover, dictionary entries and corpus data also differentiate the extent to which *bullseye* and *bloodbath* are connotated with violence. Using contemporary data from the COCA Corpus (Davies 2008) from 2009 to 2019 and the OANC Corpus (Ide 2009) from 1990 onward, Tables 5.3 and 5.4 summarise the findings of this corpus exploration of the contemporary uses of these two terms in American English and find that it is indeed the case that the *bloodbath* is more often used in the more literal sense and thus has a stronger violent connotation than is the case with *bullseye*.¹⁴ Furthermore, the corpus analysis also shows that *bullseye* is far less connotated with violence due to its more polysemous nature in which the collective meanings are far more inherently linked to the image of a bullseye as opposed to it being the target of someone shooting a gun. While the connection between a bullseye and shooting a gun is indeed a logical metaphorical extension to make, it is important to remember that people participating in archery, darts, beanbag toss, or any other sport or game involving aiming a projectile at a specific circular target are also targeting a bullseye. These corpus findings are supported in dictionary definitions as well. While the meaning involving someone successfully hitting their target (i.e. the bullseye) is presented in the second part of the third definition of *bullseye* in the Merriam-Webster English Dictionary (2024b), the other definitions concentrate on the circular shape of a bullseye. However, the definitions for *bloodbath* indicate a much stronger connection with violence. This is demonstrated in the definitions for *bloodbath* provided in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024a): (1) “a great slaughter”, (2a) “a notably fierce, violent, or destructive contest or struggle”, and (2b) “a major economic disaster”.

Our summaries of the *bloodbath* and *bullseye* controversies have so far demonstrated that the individual contexts of each utterance, the backgrounds, the reactions of the speakers of them, and the common usage of the two nouns themselves all lead to the conclusion that Trump’s *bloodbath* utterance was indeed more potentially inflammatory than Biden’s use of *bullseye*. Nevertheless, none of these factors appears to have made any difference in how certain segments of society interpreted either *bloodbath* or *bullseye* in these two contexts, nor is it likely that their minds would have been changed if they were presented with the evidence laid out above. In fact, our analysis of the comments in 5.2.1 and 5.3.1 even

¹⁴ COCA stands for *Corpus of Contemporary American English* and OANC stands for *The Open American National Corpus*.

Table 5.3 Corpus examples of *bullseye* usage

<i>Type of Use</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Literal	27	16
Figurative	86	49
Proper noun	40	23
Storm	7	4
Rash	5	3
Other/unknown	1	1
Unknown	8	4
Total	174	100

Table 5.4 Corpus examples of *bloodbath* usage¹⁵

<i>Type of Use</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Literal	212	54
Figurative	112	28
Proper noun	2	1
Unknown	68	17
Total	394	100

found cases in which people made conveniently selective or even factually dubious or erroneous claims about the official definitions of these two words as found in dictionaries. This comparative study of these two controversies therefore complements our findings from Chapter 4 and illustrates further the problematic nature of over-reliance on the inferences and definitions provided by the participants themselves and/or the active and even passive audiences involved in the situations, especially contentious ones such as political campaign messages.

Perhaps equally intriguing to the staunch defence that Trump received after his critics accused him of using inflammatory language was the utter lack of support that Biden received in response to the *bullseye* controversy, both in the press and in the online comments. This was rather surprising for us because it appears evident to us that it would have been far easier to defend Biden's supposed intent than it was to defend Trump's. While we can only speculate as to why more people in the press and online did not

¹⁵ The corpus data extraction and analysis were conducted for our benefit by our colleague Dr Caitlin Halfacre of Manchester Metropolitan University.

explicitly come to Biden's aid following the outbreak of this controversy, we can highlight a few circumstantial explanations as follows:

- Biden never had a staunchly loyal following comparable to Trump. In fact, his successful clinching of the Democratic nomination and subsequent victory in the presidential election in 2020 was achieved primarily through a broad coalition of moderate Democrats, Independents, and even some rogue moderate Republicans. As a centre-left politician, he always struggled to win favour with the progressive wing of the Democratic party, who only reluctantly supported his candidacy as a means to an end—i.e. to eject Trump from the White House (White and Kerbel 2022: 63–64).
- By this point in the race, Biden's campaign was in serious trouble, with several prominent Democratic figures encouraging him to step aside. Such circumstances likely discouraged many people from coming to his aid, regardless of what they thought about the controversy.
- It has been found in multiple previous studies that the active YouTube commenting community is often more sympathetic to Trump and conservative values generally (see Wodak Culpeper, and Semino 2021). Therefore, it is likely that this is more a reflection of the demographics of active YouTube commenters than it is of American society at large (see Pew Research Center 2024).
- Troll farms and troll bots have infected YouTube, and it is evident that Republican and Republican leaning organisations have used these in an attempt to sway public opinion on various forms of social media, (see Abeshouse 2018) including the claim from the UK government that a Russian "...troll factory is targeting politicians and baiting audiences across a number of countries" (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2022).

Other reasons that help explain why the reaction from the left was so flat regarding the *bullseye* controversy may be that it simply was not on their radar as much as it was for Trump supporters. There are multiple factors that could have caused this. First, the fact that Biden addressed this issue directly during his interview with Lester Holt and even expressed regret over the wording appears to have helped end the controversy relatively quickly, something that was further aided by him ceasing to use

bullseye in his rhetoric in the aftermath of the controversy. Moreover, the chaotic nature of the presidential campaign at the time that reached its zenith with Biden's withdrawal from the race only six days after his interview with Holt also likely helped push this controversy out of focus for many Americans.

Finally, for this chapter, we argue that these two controversies are actually quite different from each other, despite the fact that they were indeed compared to each other in the press and online. We argue that Biden's *bullseye* controversy is far more representative of a typical political talk scandal. With traditional politicians, talk scandals are common and are responded to in a fairly uniform manner. In such cases, a public figure is criticised over something that they have said, which sometimes occurs in frontstage activities and sometimes in backstage activities. These *faux pas* are rarely committed with the intention to offend others, and the politicians typically attempt to mitigate the damage done to their reputations via a public apology and/or an expression of regret and a commitment to future changes in behaviour (see Ekström and Johansson 2019). An example of this would be President Obama likening his own bowling abilities to looking like "...something in the special Olympics"—a comment that allegedly he said with the intention to suggest his own limited successes at bowling, but one which was understandably taken to be an ableist insult, albeit unintended, impacting upon professional athletes who participate in the Paralympics (ABC News 2009).

Looking at the *bullseye* controversy, this is precisely what occurred here. It is for these reasons that we argue that, as far as Biden's intentions are concerned, his controversial use of the *bullseye* comment would be best placed in the incidental zone of Archer's face aggravation scale that we provide again in Fig. 5.4. The fact that so many people interpreted it as a 'viciously intentional' threat of violence at its worst or even as a borderline incitement of violence is a further indicator of how much the emotionally charged political environment of the 2024 US Presidential election had affected the reality paradigms of the increasingly polarised American electorate. In fact, though impossible to prove definitively, we speculate that the initial accusations from right-wing figures concerning Biden's *bullseye* comment being inflammatory and inciteful of violence following the Butler assassination attempt could have been a convenient retaliation against Biden's previous criticisms and campaign commercials from March that accused Trump of inciting violence via his *bloodbath* comment/threat in the first place. It was no secret that there was a considerable degree

of open animosity between the Biden campaign team and the Trump campaign team. Such open displays of contempt even resurfaced days before election despite Biden no longer being a presidential candidate. In response to a pro-Trump comedian who called Puerto Rico “a floating island of garbage”, Biden allegedly reacted by calling either the Trump supporter’s dehumanisation of Puerto Ricans or Trump supporters in general, “the only garbage I see”.¹⁶

Trump’s *bloodbath* controversy, at least in the first utterance of it, resembles a more uniquely Trumpian scandal, simply minus his oft used element of humour that was common during his first term in office. Similarly to the use of the *kung flu* insulting nickname, the *bloodbath* threat is multifunctional and can be placed in the soft border between the intentional face aggravation area and the strategic ambivalence areas of Archer’s face aggravation scale, though in this case we would argue that it is slanted more in the direction of the intentional zone than *kung flu* was (see Fig. 5.4). The rationale behind this is that while *bloodbath*

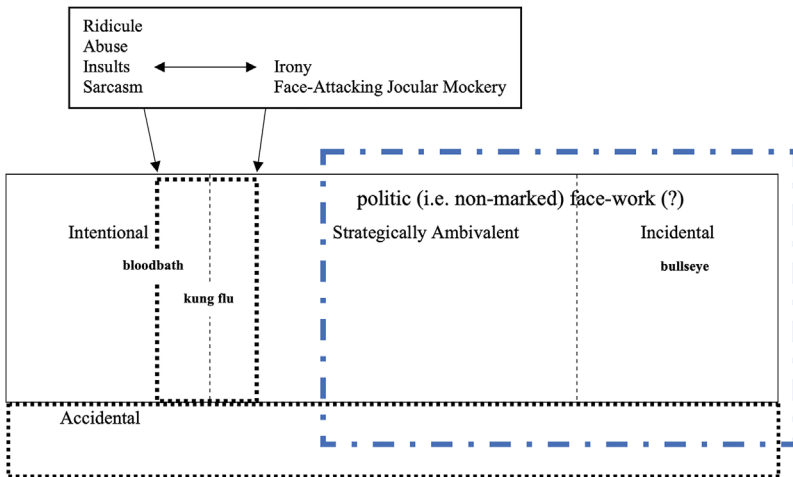


Fig. 5.4 Using Archer’s (2011a) face aggravation scale to account for Trump and Biden’s controversial utterances

¹⁶ Biden later clarified what he meant and claims that he said, “The only garbage I see floating out there is his supporter’s — his, his demonization of Latinos is unconscionable, and it’s un-American”. However, many reject this claim and assert that he was calling all Trump supporters garbage (See Madhani and Miller 2024).

does not benefit from the same sugar-coated disguise of a *joke*, its hyperbolic intensity does give it some characteristics of the ‘untruthfulness’ that is common in many instances of ‘jocular mockery’ (see Haugh and Bousfield 2012; Dynel 2017). Moreover, the fact that this threat is also multifunctional also highlights similarities with what we saw in the analysis of the *kung flu* controversy. We thus argue that Trump is using it to build rapport with his base via the *condescending*, *scorning*, or *ridiculing* (Culpeper 1996) of their perceived or constructed common foe, in this case Biden and Democrats generally. While the salience of the rapport building function is unclear in the first use of *bloodbath*, this function becomes increasingly salient following the criticism that he received and his later uses of it.

In fact, the criticism that Trump received over his first utterance of *bloodbath* was considered by Trump and his base to be so ridiculous and manipulative that it was quickly utilised in his campaign messaging for political and for fundraising purposes, as we mentioned earlier. It is in this reactionary period and process where Trump and his base of supporters start to use *bloodbath* in sarcastic, trolling-like functions (see Philips 2015) that ridiculed those who argued that his use of it constituted inflammatory language. This ridiculing via the repurposing of *bloodbath* against Biden and then Harris constituted another example of Trump and his supporters attempting to ‘verbally trap’ (see Bousfield 2007a), their targets into reacting to their taunts in predictable ways so that they could then continue to ridicule them for being “overly serious” and could accuse them of trying to “over-police” language.

This comparison of the two contested interpretations of talk scandals in the 2024 election season also demonstrates how Thomas’ (2013 [1995]: 190) notion of ‘allowable contributions’ for activity types can be reconstructed or even intentionally manipulated in some cases when they are edited, summarised, and disseminated by the press, social media, and other publishing bodies. Intriguingly, we have noted how focusing on short clips that are taken from longer speeches/conversations sets the stage for politically polarised groups to make opposing interpretations of the meaning of political rhetoric that they consume based on *assumptions* that they have made about the (edited/truncated) context. The context as presented in edited/truncated clips is in most cases incomplete excepting cases in which the audience members have watched/read the speech/conversation in its entirety. Such incomplete comprehensions help create an environment in which alternative and competing understandings of

the ‘allowable contributions’ are more likely. This sufficiently accounts for cases in which a comment can be uttered during a speech and attract little to no notice and thusly cause no controversy whatsoever yet can receive a considerably different reaction and interpretation when an edited and shortened clip or quote is released to the public.

To put it another way, Lorenzo Dus (2009) argued for the role of what she called ‘double articulation’ in broadcast talk. What she means by this is that the speaker in any event which is recorded for television and eventually broadcast goes through two levels of *articulation*:

- **In the first level of articulation:** The speaker chooses what to say to their (usually immediately present) interlocutors. These, in relation to our Fig. 2.1, would fit the role of the ‘intended audience’. In effect, we carefully choose what we want to say based on the effect we think such words will have when spoken to our intended audience. As such, we might expect Trump, as the speaker engaging in what he says at the initial or first level of articulation, to be on some level cognisant of the wider context in which he is speaking (to automotive workers at their plant as his intended audience) and, as such, expect *them* to hear and interpret his words within that wider but assumed context. By the same token, we might expect Trump to be aware that his words would also be reported in the second level of articulation for an ‘ancillary’ or even ‘extended audience’ as we depicted in Fig. 2.1.
- **In relation to the second level of articulation:** Considering news reports, which are often timed precisely to the second, this means that their editing process is considerably marked. As a result, the editing team’s influence on how a person’s words—and the context in which they were spoken—are *presented* becomes more marked as well. Thusly, the ‘interferences’ that result from the second level of articulation can and will have an influencing effect on how members of certain audiences interpret the utterances of the people reported as speaking. For example, the strong reactions that followed from the *ancillary* and *extended* audiences to the news reports that scrutinised Trump’s threat of a “bloodbath” if he was not elected in the upcoming November may be, at least in part, attributable to the second level of articulation. Thus, this represents an addition level of interference between Trump and his audiences at all three levels, as depicted in Fig. 2.1.

In fact, the role of the press in these two talk scandals appears to expand even beyond shaping how people interpret certain utterances. Particularly in Trump’s case, the extensive attention that Trump’s utterance of *bloodbath* received quickly became a news story in its own right among American conservative circles. This was subsequently seized upon and integrated into Trump’s political messaging. Trump and his campaign team effectively managed to spin the criticisms he received—following his use of *bloodbath*—to the campaign’s advantage by portraying Trump as the victim of a conspiracy between the press and his Democratic challengers—one allegedly aimed at preventing him from winning a second term “at all costs”. Ironically, though Biden also complained about unfair coverage that he received by the press following the outbreak of his *bullseye* talk scandal, these complaints did not gain him much sympathy and were not able to be spun to his advantage. This uncanny ability of Trump to not only survive public scandals but sometimes even thrive because of them highlights the extent to which figures like Trump are able to manipulate the press, even a hostile one, to serve their own purposes. We elaborate on how publicised criticisms of Trump are received defensively by Trump’s supporters in Chapter 6.

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Implications, Discussion, Conclusions, and Next Steps

Abstract This chapter brings together insights from Chapters 4 and 5, comparing how people interpreted Trump’s *kung flu* and *bloodbath* remarks versus Biden’s *bullseye* comment during the 2020 and 2024 US presidential campaigns. It argues that Trump deliberately used vague, exaggerated language to stir outrage, connect with his base, and dodge criticism. In contrast, Biden’s *bullseye* remark, an apparent accidental slip, was heavily criticised by Trump’s supporters but barely defended by Democrats, the media, or YouTube commenters. The analysis highlights how deeply divided worldviews, fuelled by social media and selective media editing, lead to wildly different interpretations. The chapter argues that emotional appeals effectively trump rational debate, an issue worsened by social media algorithms and possible foreign meddling. It concludes that a pragmaticognitive approach—focusing on how language is interpreted—is essential to understanding political polarisation, media influence, and ultimately the health of democratic discourse.

Keywords Face · Identity · Polarisation · Social media · Pragmacognitive approach

6.1 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS OF CHAPTERS 4 AND 5

Our analysis of the contested interpretations of controversial utterances from Presidents Trump and Biden that involve ambiguous language in the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections reveals clear differences in the rhetorical styles of these two opposing candidates. Moreover, we have also established that the ways in which interpretations of arguably indeterminate language—particularly when it is uttered in contentious activity types such as political rhetoric—can differ dramatically depending on not just how the utterance is formulated but also who the speaker is and the composition of the different audience(s) involved. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as Trump is partial to using hyperbolic, creative, and ambiguous language, both of the cases that we analysed involving his language were received and interpreted in contested fashions—with his MAGA partisans arguing in favour of the least problematic interpretation possible, and his more vehement detractors insisting on the most problematic interpretation possible. We should also note that in both cases a small number of people either refused to take the entire debate seriously or voiced complaints about why these controversies were even considered newsworthy in the first place. When the latter comments are made, they effectively dismiss both the problematic and the arguably more positive interpretations, meaning that a default position—of non-problematic—is assumed. Indeed, knowing full well that certain sections of the press and his Democratic adversaries focus doggedly on his rhetoric, much of Trump’s language controversies, including the examples discussed here, are potentially perpetuated by Trump by design. This assertion has been made by numerous scholars who have observed Trump’s rhetoric, such as Mercieca (2020), Wodak (2020), and Moffitt (2016), who argue that Trump and other similar politicians project their personas as strong leaders to their base of supporters by fighting against the system or the ‘establishment’ via continuous strategic scandalisation of events in public forums. They allegedly bring this about via blatant provocations of outrage from the mainstream media and traditional politicians, while simultaneously playing to a base which is actively, or at least apparently (bot farms notwithstanding), active on alternate media (e.g. podcasts) or social media (e.g. Instagram, Twitter/X, YouTube). Indeed, Wodak (2020: 15–18) argues that this strategy of consistently and intentionally provoking public scandals plays to certain politicians’ advantage because

the expressions of outrage that they provoke from their adversaries are frequently evaluated (or at least claimed to be evaluated) positively by their partisans and supporters. Indeed, in both the *kung flu* and *bloodbath* case studies, the scandals that were provoked by Trump's problematic impoliteness formulae were indeed embraced and even reproduced *en masse* by his acolytes, not only despite the cries of condemnation from Trump's adversaries but in all likelihood because of them.¹

Furthermore, our analyses have spotlighted that at his rallies as well as on social media, Trump adopts a rhetorical style that operates within the schema of *macho jocular mockery*, which is embraced by working-class men. Regardless of whether Trump is fully aware of why this is so effective or not, pandering to this demographic specifically has been extremely effective for him in both primary and general election contests because this group has been a major cohort of the Republican voting coalition for decades (see Brewer 2012). Moreover, they have been shown to be a group that prizes and embraces jocular mockery for both humour and for social bonding purposes. Indeed, on the latter point, Haugh and Bousfield (2012) argue that the use of jocular mockery binds the social group together, and if the target takes offence at the jocular mockery, then it is the target, and not the commentator of the mockery, that is at fault, primarily for taking themselves too seriously. Therefore, by appealing to this group and metaphorically *speaking their language*, Trump has proven to be effective in energising and thus mobilising them during his past three campaigns for the presidency. In his most recent bid in 2024, Trump even expanded his voting coalition substantially, by effectively targeting and mobilising young men from multiple ethnic communities as well (see Wolfson 2024). Finally, we have also demonstrated that the *bloodbath* threat, like the *kung flu* insult, is multifunctional and can be placed at the 'soft border' between the *intentional face aggravation* area and the *strategic ambivalence* areas of Archer's face aggravation scale, though in this case *bloodbath* would be slanted more in the direction of the intentional zone than *kung flu* was.

Biden's controversial utterance of *bullseye* on the other hand, does not resemble the Trumpian language controversies on its surface at all. Furthermore, if we compare what Biden was reported to have actually

¹ This assertion is confirmed from the comment analyses that we have conducted in Chapters 4 and 5, though similar statements are regularly made by Trump supporters in interviews as well (e.g. Faguy 2024).

said to any of the other numerous ‘Biden gaffes’ that were introduced in Chapter 2, we argue that it looks extraordinarily tame and rather benign. This therefore makes the comparisons that it received with Trump’s *bloodbath* comment even more surprising. Moreover, we have asserted that in the pre-Trumpian American political landscape, Biden’s *bullseye* would have likely resulted in a typical political talk scandal in the most extreme case, if it had resulted in a controversy at all. In fact, we have speculated that the criticisms that Biden received from right-wing figures were likely additionally motivated by their desire to retaliate against Biden and his campaign team for the accusations that they made against Trump concerning his *bloodbath* comment in the first place. By labelling Biden as the perpetrator of inflammatory language that incited political violence, they were able to essentially deflect the criticism that Trump received concerning his *bloodbath* comment back to Biden, the initial accuser.²

Unlike Trump’s defenders who steadfastly defended him against criticism, very few people came to Biden’s defence. Moreover, even some members of the press took a critical view of Biden’s rhetoric following the assassination attempt against Trump, as was seen in the NBC interview with Biden done by Lester Holt. The contrast between the staunch loyalty that Trump received from his supporters compared to the lacklustre support that Biden got from Democratic coalition supporters when he found himself under similar scrutiny suggests that there are some key differences in the cohesions of the Republican and Democratic coalitions. To a much stronger extent, Trump has come to personify his MAGA supporters themselves to the extent that an affront against him constitutes an affront against them, thus integrating Trump’s face needs/desires into their own. This suggests the metonymic relationship of face suggested by Bousfield (2013, 2018; see discussion in 6.2,) that extends to people’s political leanings and positions, and the politicians that represent them. In many ways this has similarities to the way in which individual members of families, close-knit communities, nations of people, and other social groupings have significant aspects of their faces invested in these group memberships (see discussion of *social identity face* in Spencer-Oatey 2008: 15; Culpeper 2011: 30–32). The same does not appear to be the case concerning Biden’s *face* among Democratic activists and voters in 2020

² Such claims of victimhood and deflecting the original criticisms back to the accuser or some other scapegoat is a key element of Wodak’s (2020, 25–26) “Far-right Populist Perpetuum Mobile” formula.

or 2024, nor did this appear to change upon Harris' takeover of the 2024 campaign. We expand on the points discussed in this paragraph in more detail in 6.2. All this has implications for the role of language and linguistic behaviour in the representation and reflection of ideology through interactants' face and face construction and identity. These are concepts to which we now turn to explore in more detail.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE, IDEOLOGY, FACE, AND IDENTITY

The concepts of *identity* (Bousfield 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013; Joseph 2013) and *face* (Goffman 1955, 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987) are in Arundale's (2010) perspective, distinct and separate concepts, but Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013) and Joseph (2013) argue that they must be theorised together. This is a key point which speaks directly to the reasons why so many of our online commentators to the *kung flu*, *bloodbath*, and *bullseye* comments by Trump and Biden, respectively, responded so hotly to the wide range of possible interpretations of them. Bousfield (2013: 236; see also Bousfield 2018) has argued that face is not just individually focused, but is and can be realised metonymically, too—where face and face expectations by individual interlocutors are invested in other entities or groups to which the individual belongs, feel they belong, or aspires to belong. This, Bousfield (2013: 236) argues, is already explicit in Goffman's (1967: 5) original definition of *face* where he defines it as:

[...] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself (sic!) by the line others assume he is taking during a particular contact. Face is an image of *self* ... [one that is] ...*delineated* [=described precisely, and given form and boundaries/limits] in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, **as when a person makes a good showing for his (sic!) profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.** (Bousfield's emphasis in *italics* and **bold**)³

Therefore, face, “being a central issue to most accounts of interpersonal conflict [...]” (Bousfield 2013: 37), is seen here to be central,

³ See Bousfield (2013:40, 2018: 236) for rationale about these precisions to Goffman's definition of face.

metonymically, to larger group-based notions of identity and, as such, provides these social groupings with reasons, or *casus belli* for engaging, embarking upon, or responding to real or perceived threats and/or conflicts, be they physical, emotional, political, or any combinations of these. In the cases observed in Chapters 4 and 5, the conflict takes shape in the contested interpretations of a political figure's perceived-to-be "true intentions", which results in taking antithetical positions and having one's own position challenged. Indeed, Scollon and Scollon (2001) claim that "[...] there can be no interaction without face [being an issue]".

To add to the complexity of these group-based conflicts, it is also necessary to account for the relationship between *face* that is constructed in and through interaction and the relationship between *face* and *identity*, which though related do not overlap completely. Joseph (2013: 36) argues that:

Identity relates classically to who individuals are, understood in terms of the groups to which they belong, including nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, sexual orientation, social class and an unlimited number of other possibilities.

From this Bousfield (2013, 2018) argued that *face* is a 'punctual' phenomenon while *identity* is 'durative' one. Meaning, that while *face* can be and often is challenged or robustly managed in interaction, *identity* is much slower to change.

What is intriguing for us in this investigation is that we are dealing with activity types (Levinson 1992) that involve minimal speaking participants and multiple audiences. Concerning the audiences, the intended audiences are physically present and listen to the speeches in their entirety while extended audience members watch recordings of the speeches or read excerpts from them after the fact, all of which are produced and distributed to them via the press or other media providers (i.e. the ancillary audience, as we identified above in Sect. 2.3).

However, these three face-threatening utterances (*kung flu*, *bloodbath*, and *bullseye*) that we have observed differ from many past studies that attempt address face and identity issues in that the targets of them were not physically present but were instead able to engage with them after the fact upon viewing them as *extended audience* members. Additionally, these instances are also unique from the types of linguistic conflict observed in

many other studies because of the intrinsic conflictive nature of publicised political campaign rhetoric along with the inherent duality of the messaging sent out by the candidates who must (a) seek to boost their own *faces* in light of the competition in which they find themselves, (b) engage in positive facework with the voters and especially their supporters in order to maintain and grow their supportive base in the adversarial American political system, and (c) attack the *face(s)* of their opponents with the aim to projecting them negatively in comparison to themselves.

While it is perhaps to be expected that the active voting population would become emotionally invested in any election, the increasing polarisation of the political parties and American society in general has contributed to an ever-intensifying feeling of mistrust and hostility between the Republican and Democratic voting coalitions. The effects of the increasing entrenchment of an *us vs. them* dichotomy in the American political society that has been brewing for decades appears to not only have made the collective *faces* of certain groups more sensitive to any perceived threats, but—as predicted by Bousfield (2013)—it also appears to have accumulated in strength for long enough periods of time to affect their notion of *identity*. This now appears to have resulted in a sizable amount of the American populace holding political affiliation among their most cherished identifying attributes as opposed to it being in periphery of the more traditional essential identifying features such as family, religion, ethnicity, and nationality.

Trump's effect of dichotomising large swaths of the American adult population into two morally opposed groups became all the more explicit immediately following the announcement of the results of the November 2024 election. Anecdotally, it was observed that there was a short-lived burst of social media posts sent out from those who supported Harris' campaign that expressed messages—in surprising unity for 'left-leaning' groups—that essentially expressed the sentiment given below:

- If you voted for Trump, I never want to see or talk to you again. You made your choice. You chose a bigot, rapist, and fraud.

One point to be made here is that the unity message with the left-leaning groups and coalition typified their identities not as left-leaning per se, but as antithetical to the representative chosen by the right-leaning groups and coalition, *criticising* (see Bousfield 2008) both Trump and

by metonymic extension, those who supported him, based on perceived personal characteristics and perceived or proven past actions.

In an immediate response to this trend, Trump supporters reacted to these social media messages defiantly by *ridiculing* (cf. Culpeper 1996) those on the losing side as overly sensitive (cf. the discussion in Haugh and Bousfield 2012), as they had been doing since Trump's entrance into politics. These reactionary posts essentially expressed variants of the example message seen below:

- In case any of you needed a reason to unfriend me today...



Trump 2024!!!!!! USA USA USA

Such posts clearly imply (Grice 1975, 1989) via flouts of the maxims of manner and relation that political aspects of the poster's identity, in the poster's own mind, far outweigh the affiliative benefits of online, or social media 'friendship'. In such a case, aspects of identity, and affiliation with the right leaning coalition of Republican support outweigh the affiliation of local, regional, or national identity. In effect, such posters chose the assumed positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987) benefits of political affiliation over positive face benefits of most other affiliations.

These social media back-and-forths also further highlighted the extent to which those of the political left were not so much expressing themselves vicariously through Harris or as emotionally hurt by Harris defeat as they were offended by Trump's victory. The social media responses of the type given above by Trump's supporters, however, does indicate signs that their political backing of Trump, and by extension Trump himself, have at this point become integrated into the social aspects of their *face* and, as Trump has been a major political force for a decade now, their social *identities* as well. In contrast, for those opposed to Trump and his political movement, they do not yet appear to have a champion for their side that is equivalent to Trump in terms of unifying the group together. In fact, ironically, the closest thing that they have to a single unifying figure is Trump himself—though their stance towards him is vehemently oppositional.

This is not to suggest that we assume that this process has occurred equally across the board. In fact, as our analyses have shown, the salient

link between party affiliation and identity appears to be far stronger among MAGA Republicans, at least in terms of identifying strongly around one leader and one unified political party. We saw this in our analyses in Chapters 4 and 5 where the defenders of Trump consistently acted in unison via the use of strikingly similar arguments (i.e. ‘mainstream media and Democrats consistently take Trump’s words out of context’; ‘Trump is hilarious/awesome’; etc.). This, coincidentally, was not found to a significant extent among the people who criticised Trump’s language, nor—as we noted above—was there any notable defending of Biden when he faced criticisms over his use of language. In fact, Trump’s political allies and base of supporters demonstrate an undeterred and unwavering loyalty towards him in a way that appears emotional as well as steadfast. We explore this point in Sect. 6.3. Additionally, Trump now represents a strong patriarchal figure who can ‘do no wrong’ (see Lakoff’s 2014 definition of the ‘strict father model’). This sentiment that Trump represents a strong and authoritative patriarchal figure was coincidentally reported upon by a BBC reporter just days before election day. Through interviews with six self-described Trump voters, Faguy (2024) reports that among other things, these voters support Trump and identify with him as a politician and human being because of his supposed strong leadership qualities, his patriotism, his knowledge of the business world, and his human duality that includes toughness against adversaries and softness with those he loves. One telling quote from these supporters came from a young woman who stated that “He invokes fear in the rest of the world” (Faguy 2024).

Indeed, such sentiments are not restricted to the general voting public who are in support of Trump. A small but vocal number of well-known public figures in the worlds of entertainment are also Trump supporters, from James Woods, Mel Gibson, Kevin Sorbo, Jon Vought, Sylvester Stallone, and Dennis Quaid. In fact, months prior to election day on Piers Morgan’s YouTube Talk Show, *Piers Morgan Uncensored*, Hollywood actor Denis Quaid also evoked Trump’s hard demeanour but via the common American clichéd expression “people might call him an asshole, but he’s my asshole” (Morgan 2024). Beyond operating as a conventionally communicative *cliché* (see Bullo and Bousfield 2023), this might well also be interpreted as an example of jocular mockery (Haugh and Bousfield 2012), a blend of which conforms to the adage that ‘never a truer word said in jest’ (see Bousfield 2007c), or it might be some hitherto unexplored linguistic phenomenon ripe for interrogation under the

banner of pragmacognitive research. However, as we mentioned earlier, it appears on another level of understanding to be a claim and appeal to emotion in decision-making about politics, rather than reason (a point we explore in more detail in Sect. 6.3). Moreover, it is perhaps unsurprising that many voters engage in an emotional response, rather than a rational one in terms of politics and political affiliation. Emotions evoke physiobiological responses in the form of feelings (see Lerner et al. 2007; Lerner et al. 2015), which are easier to respond to than cold, clinical, rational decisions, which often do not evoke the same sorts of physiobiological responses. Lerner et al. (2015: 799) note that “emotions constitute potent, pervasive, predictable, sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial drivers of decision making”. As such, our discussion now turns to the relationship between language use, language interpretation, reason, and emotion in interpretative decision-making.

6.3 LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY THROUGH EMOTION AND REASON

Throughout this book, our discussions and arguments have hitherto treated as equal the pro-/anti-Trump and pro-/anti-Biden & Harris discussions and interpretations of *what was said* and *what was understood*. In the age of social media, this is, it must be argued and acknowledged, no longer a safe assumption or stance to take. This is not to say, we hasten to add, that we should be taking sides. Rather, our point here is that the way in which the pro-Trump and pro-Biden comments have been treated and disseminated is not equal.

There are concerns, and there have been accusations that ‘X’ (formerly ‘Twitter’) backgrounded accounts which were arguing for pro Harris/Walz (and before that pro-Biden/Harris) messaging, and foregrounded pro-Trump messaging (see Gillum, Corse, and Tong 2024; Graham and Andrejevic 2024; Harwell and Merrill 2024). Should this be true and given the intensely influential nature that many attribute to social media on modern American society, the impact of this cannot be overstated. Like traditional media before it, social media plays a significant role in the way many prominent figures and political ideas are framed to large swathes of the public. In fact, a recent Pew Research Center study finds that approximately 20% of the American public receives the majority of their news from social media influencers. For adults under the age of 30,

the percentage jumps up to 37% and the distribution between political affiliations or leanings is approximately equal (Stocking et al. 2024).

Prior to the explosion of social media in the noughties, Former Prime Minister Tony Blair (2007) noted that in the early days of ‘New Labour’ the party paid particular attention to “courting, assuaging and persuading the media” to promote their new image for many of the same reasons serious contenders of political office now court social media influencers. To explain this intensive and explicit strategy on his part, Blair stated “In our own defence, after 18 years of opposition and the, at times, ferocious hostility of parts of the media, it was hard to see any alternative”. Blair believed that without good media relations it would be challenging if not impossible for the party he then led to get their message out to the public. Concerning changes underway in the press since the Labour Party rose to power, Blair (2007) again said something prescient about this which is relevant to our discussions throughout this book: “The audience needs to be arrested, held and their emotions engaged. Something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked”. The preponderance of right leaning messaging, with a focus on the emotional reasons for candidate voting, rather than the rational, clearly played a part in the 2024 US presidential election. This is certainly also the case in the preceding two presidential elections which—as stated in Chapters 2 and 4—were notably emotionally charged elections compared to the preceding elections over the past couple of decades. Moreover, these points are not confined to the United States and similar emotionally charged elections resulting in unexpected and dramatic consequences have also taken place all over other Western democracies—perhaps most notably the 2016 ‘Brexit’ vote in the UK. Above, we argued that *emotion*, rather than *logic* and *reason* may well be an influential factor in voting selection or political identity. The same could be said for interpretation and interpretative bias to all forms of messaging. There may be good reasons why emotions are important for perception and interpretation. Damasio (1994) argued that emotions have a powerful influence on our decision-making processes more generally, and we would argue that the same may well be true of interpretations of ambivalent messaging more specifically in relation to our study, here. Emotional messages, Damasio (1994) argues, can create strong feelings that resonate more deeply than logical and rational arguments, making them more memorable and persuasive. This is essentially the basis for the linguistic and cultural/critical concept of ‘foregrounding’ (see the

discussion in Leech and Short 1981: 28, 138–46; Short 1996), especially through the sub-concept of ‘*deviation*’—that which breaks our expectations as to what normally happens or should happen. Of course, what *should* happen need not be related to observation or personal experience; and reality paradigms about expected behaviours or events gleaned from social, cultural, legal, or religious authorities or influences would feed such understandings. To put this more simply—just because we have experienced past behaviours or situations does not guarantee we are happy with said experiences. We may seek a new social or political ‘reality’ to the one we currently inhabit—indeed, one might argue this is the essential human condition. As such, the emotional stimuli we receive from consuming for example social media news messaging may well ‘open our eyes’ to alternate possibilities far beyond what we have previously experienced or accepted as fact.

From the perspective of such social influences, Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1993) consider that emotions are ‘contagious’. They argue that when we see others reacting emotionally to a message, we are more likely to adopt similar feelings and beliefs. This social aspect can amplify the emotional messaging. However, using the infectious metaphor further, such emotions need a vector (see Sect. 6.4). In the context of contemporary politics, it is the traditional and social media that currently serve as such vectors. And where such vectors are not only not contained or avoided, but actually facilitated (as per the accusations of ‘X’ promoting certain messaging over others, as we noted above) then this would provide fertile breeding ground for such emotions and emotionally charged interpretations and understandings of ambivalent and indeterminate messaging to occur and to circulate, rapidly.

The additional issue with such ambivalent and indeterminate messaging is that to consider all possible meanings, balance these in context, and consider the multiple possible interpretations all takes cognitive effort. Emotional messages and messaging talks to the heuristics of cognitive ease. Heuristics means that people use mental shortcuts to make quick decisions (see the discussion in Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Schemata which we explored in our discussion of reality paradigms (see discussion in Sect. 1.3) are a mechanism for heuristic thinking. However, emotions and emotional responses can also serve as heuristics, guiding our judgements without the need for more detailed analysis, especially where such a heuristic gels with our pre-existing understandings or beliefs. All this is closely tied to the concept of cognitive ease, as emotional

messages, according to Kahneman (2011), are often simpler and easier to process than complex logical arguments. Our brains tend to favour information that is easy to understand and easy to remember, hence the reason we tend to rely on emotional cues for interpretation and understanding. Additionally, this links into the argument around *confirmation bias*. Nickerson (1998) argues that we tend to seek out and believe information that aligns with our existing beliefs, understandings, and emotions. Emotional messaging that confirms our pre-existing reality paradigms and belief worlds are more likely to be accepted than rational arguments or counterarguments that challenge them.

All this is hardly a failing of society, rather it is an exploitation by those in charge of communicative forces in society of a feature of human behaviour and a predictable behavioural response to certain stimuli. Cosmides and Tooby (2000) argue that, from an evolutionary perspective, emotions have played a crucial role in survival. Quick emotional responses to threats or opportunities were essential for our ancestors, and this tendency, they argue, still influences our behaviour today. This, we would argue, in line with Cosmides and Tooby (2000) includes responses to messaging on social media. Firstly, because the average time spent on a tweet or post on X is 15 seconds (Newberry 2024), Asif and Kazi (2024) and Mark (2023) note that attention spans are reducing, partly due to digital overload, and partly due to a rising need for instant gratification (see also Heshmat 2016, Perlmutter 2019). All of these aspects conspire to create a tendency for quick emotional responses and, consequently, rapid decision-making (see Perlmutter 2019). Such decisions can be and often are lacking in introspection and criticality for (i) *what* understanding has been reached, (ii) *why* the interpretation has been arrived at in that way, or even (iii) *whether* alternative understandings were possible from what was said in the context(s) in which it was produced and received. Secondly the emotive/expressive nature of the privileged and preferred messaging on, for example, social media tends to seek an emotional response, precisely because emotional responses are not only foregrounded, but drive interactions—a key feature and requirement of contemporary social media where engagement farming is important financially. Krakauer (2024) notes that deliberately outrageous posts—sharing extreme opinions on ‘hot-button’ issues—are ones which are designed to provoke strong reactions, and which overwhelmingly tend to receive them. This also helps explain the phenomenon where people double down on their positions when criticised (as we outlined in Sect. 1.3).

All of these changes in the consumption of media and other public communication coincidentally play *into* the strengths of figures like President Trump and play *against* those of traditional politicians. Long before he officially entered politics as a candidate for president in 2015, Trump had become a highly effective craftsman in marketing and showmanship—to the point where he has often been compared to the nineteenth-century showman, businessman, and politician, P.T. Barnum (see O’Brien 2016: Ch.8; Mercieca 2020: 212). These skills were passed on to Trump from multiple figures in his life and from educational institutions, including his father, the New York Military Academy, the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, and New York attorney Roy Cohn (O’Brien 2016: Ch. 3; D’Antonio 2016: Ch. 3). These skills were further honed while he worked for his father’s company, before taking it over and running the Trump Organisation on his own from the early 1970s. His bombastic, aggressive, and arguably shameless and unapologetic self-promotion skills then developed even more when he became the host of the US version of *The Apprentice* for 14 seasons. As a first-rate marketer and showman, Trump is an expert in precisely the sort of communication strategies that are rewarded in the contemporary media and communication markets. Put simply, he knows how to attract attention and how to sell himself using short, simple, and entertaining messages that are hence memorable and effective. Moreover, his early adoption of Twitter (latterly ‘X’) as a communication medium in 2009, made him a trailblazer regarding celebrity engagement with the public via social media (Brown 2016; White and Kerbel 2022: 114–118). This, coupled with the fact that he is among the most successful exploitative reality television game show hosts in the United States, has given him decades to develop and refine his already strong skills in the art of pushing the boundaries of acceptability in a public format while also avoiding severe censure from the American Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and outcries from large segments of the public. The fact that Trump has clearly honed the art of emotive/expressive communication, preferring this over rationality or even specific detail, means that his messages, linguistic choices, and language resources used within them lend themselves very well to considerations of the current limits of interpretability in linguistic and pragmacognitive thinking in academic theorising and understanding. Indeed, we would consider the exploration and further focused attention on this matter—the current limits of academic understanding, and wider appreciation of the implications of this—to be urgent

and pressing areas for consideration. After all, the recent turn in politics and the shift in the political centre in Western democracies, coupled with and fed by the changes in the platforms and norms of political and social discourse, are all clearly here to stay for the foreseeable future.

6.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have attempted to (re)position linguistics more generally and pragmatics more specifically within a pragmacognitive understanding of interpretation and meaning-taking. This is opposed to the overwhelming mass of work to date which has hitherto concentrated on meaning-making. It should be clearly self-evident that despite hearing the same words by the same speaker intoned in the same way, we can come to different meanings and interpretations as to what was meant by what was said. The reasons for the variation of interpretation are not therefore down solely to the linguistic choices or language resources used by the speaker. Rather, the interpretation made is based in part on what was said through the linguistic choices or language resources employed and in part on the reality paradigms and understanding of the wider socio-political contexts in which such language choices are made. In this way, by demonstrating this process in this book, we have aimed to catalyse and stimulate what we consider to be the urgent and necessary debate and exploration of a pragmacognitive turn and approach to analysing language, meaning, and interpretation. In terms of the data chosen here in this book to stimulate this discussion, it should also be apparent that the language of politics and individuals' political affiliation are not exercises in reason and rationality, but rather in emotion and identity (see Westen 2007; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2013). We already know that where there is language and identity, there is the study of pragmatics. However, as we have argued above in Chapter 1, traditional speaker-oriented views of pragmatics or their reactionary-responsive counterparts as cultural/critical and postmodern hearer-oriented views of language or pragmatics are similarly impoverished even if they are diametrically opposed views of communication and meaning-making. Voloshinov (1986) reputedly claimed that one person's word is a bridge between themselves and another. This would imply that the 'foundation' on which the bridge of words is based must be taken into wider consideration, and these bases need to be of more or less equal footing in terms of stability. In the data that we have analysed and in the contemporary US political context, the consequences of consistently

adopting a rhetorical style that only appeals to one narrowly targeted grouping of people out of the whole leads to a situation where significant splintering of the overall populace can take place. In other words, and continuing with the ‘bridge’ metaphor, the bridges of communication in the US American context are getting narrower and are connecting smaller and smaller communities.

This provides insights into why we observed such contested interpretations in our case studies in Chapters 4 and 5. Considering that the dichotomised interpreting groups of the *kung flu*, *bloodbath*, and *bullseye* comments approach their interpretations from different schematic backgrounding perspectives, it is only logical that we expect these groups of people come to opposing conclusions concerning the interpretations of emotionally charged language that is formulated using indeterminate wording. These different schematic backgrounding perspectives are formulated by their respective understandings of what Dawkins (1976) called ‘memes’.

In this work Dawkins defined a meme as a unit of cultural understanding which is transmitted similar to how genes transmit biological traits. In effect, Dawkins describes memes as ideas, behaviours, or cognitive styles of thinking that spread from person to person and from mind to mind within a culture or subcultural group. For the purposes of this book, we prefer a wider ‘infection’ metaphor to the more narrowly genetic one Dawkins uses, the reasons for which we elaborate on below. Certainly, the socially shared reality paradigms of Pro-Trump and Pro-Biden supporters in a dichotomised political system and social context would seem to suggest that the concept of memes is an effective one for our explanatory purposes, here. This said, however, the reason we prefer applying our infection metaphor, as opposed to the genetic one that Dawkins uses, is that infections require three main elements for the transmission of its (metaphoric) ‘genetic material’: AGENT (the pathogen), VECTOR (means of transmission), and LOADING (the amount of AGENT communicated by the VECTOR). These extended metaphors help us explain how such memes are so readily communicated in the contemporary world:

Agent in this case is the propositional content of the idea being expressed. What is being claimed in terms of the interpretation made (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) and what linguistic devices are being used to do so, to what effect?

Vector in this case is clearly algorithmically asymmetrical social media posts, this being the ‘organism’ or system that transmits the ‘infectious agent’ from one host (the social media poster) to another (the reader/receiver of the post).

Loading in this case is we would argue the weight and strength of the messages based on how many of the same or similar type are being deployed or corralled for a particular purpose. With the prevalence of bot farms, and queries about algorithmic fairness of messaging (where some posters’ messages are algorithmically privileged over others for visibility and reach) which we covered above, the significance of the use of this metaphor should be apparent to all readers of this book.

When we couple all this with an apparent lack of large swathes of the populace applying critical thinking to their voting preferences (see Reboot Foundation 2020; The Learning Agency 2020) allied with a growing mistrust of experts and expert opinions (see Weingart, Joubert and Connaway 2021; Este 2023), it may be fair to conclude that ignorance, or rather ‘expert-avoidant opinion sharing’, is not only prized but has been effectively weaponised for both communicative and suasive purposes. This is made all the more problematic because we have now entered into an era where this weariness for experts has expanded into explicit mistrust (see Newman and Fletcher 2017).

This mistrust in mainstream media is further exacerbated by what might be described as ‘bad actors’ or those who seek to fan the flames of discord among competing groups in Western democracies. Certainly, on this latter point Kudryavtsev (2025) reports that the *Social Design Agency* and the *Internet Research Agency* as well as *Russia Today* (RT) were all influential in a campaign of ‘alternate information’, in what Meta themselves referred to as a “coordinated influence campaign” in 2022, both of which were recognised as digital threats. The Straits Times (2025) reported that “G-7 says Russia funding covert efforts to undermine elected governments” and that “...the Kremlin had funded and directed covert efforts by state entities to undermine elected governments around the world using global disinformation and influence campaigns” (The Straits Times 2025). Similar observations were noted by The Sofia Globe (2025) who reported that organisations working on behalf of the Kremlin “...employ deceitful tactics, aiming to exploit social and political issues to polarize and weaken societies, to undermine and delegitimize elected governments, and to advance the Kremlin’s malign interests” (The Sofia Globe 2025).

The US Department of State (2025), in a now archived post, released a statement to the same effect on 17 January 2025, where they said:

The G7 RRM notes recent statements by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada exposing the ongoing covert activities of Russian state media outlet RT (formerly Russia Today) and the Social Design Agency (SDA).

These statements reveal that, according to the G7, the Kremlin has funded and directed covert efforts by these entities to subvert societies through global disinformation and influence campaigns.

Although such sources currently stop short of specifying the precise nature of the influence campaigns, many are arguably operating as respondents on social media to perceived, newsworthy events, such as Trump's *bloodbath* comment, and Biden's *bullseye* comment. Indeed, Truss and Dorries (2022), formerly Foreign Secretary, and Culture Secretary of the UK under Boris Johnson's premiership, produced a press release entitled "UK exposes sick Russian troll factory plaguing social media with Kremlin propaganda" in which they noted that the troll factory in question was "[...] using Telegram to actively recruit and co-ordinate new supporters who then target social media profiles of Kremlin critics". Such tactics include:

- focusing activity on posting comments, rather than authoring original content – a tactic likely to decrease the risks of being detected by social media platforms for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour and/or harmful content.
- searching for 'organic content' posted by genuine users coherent with the lines they want to push, and then working to amplify these messages, in order that such views are distorted as the norm. This means that, provided the content they post is not too offensive, they are unlikely to be subject to de-platforming interventions.

(Truss and Dorries 2022).

It would be naive of us to think this had not also happened in the social media responses to the *kung flu*, *bloodbath*, and *bullseye* reports of the various news outlets explored here in this study. Indeed, beyond the above discussion about the emotional engagement with Trump or Biden, it is entirely possible, given the points we make immediately above, that

the talk scandals investigated in this study were intentionally amplified to spark controversy among the dichotomised American population.

With such apparent fears about manipulation, it does draw into consideration the nature of the interpretations made, and the current and future efficacy of linguistic resources deployed by a speaker or author in attempting to produce counter-narratives to those already held, or towards which one is already actively cognitively predisposed. The implications of this for interpretation and understanding in particular, and for society in general, we leave for future research and future researchers to consider. The arguments and conclusions presented in this book are relevant across diverse fields, including legal settings, marketing and advertising, healthcare communication, education, media reporting, and journalism. They also pertain to conflict resolution and diplomatic discourse, requiring engagement with cross-cultural communication and broader cultural and critical studies. Moreover, these insights extend to telecinematic discourse, exploring stylistic, as well as critical and cultural analysis. All of these areas are connected to the issues and challenges of the interpretation of discourse, the weaponisation of messaging in politics, and the consequent risks posed to democracy, all of which are evident in our above discussion. Suffice it to say, here, that we consider such future research to be of immense and ever pressing importance, the significance of which cannot be overstated, and must not be under-considered.

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