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Accounting for (strategically) ambiguous facework using Trump as a case study

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Abstract: Archer's (2015. Slurs, insults, (backhanded) compliments and other strategic facework moves. *Language Sciences* 52. 82–97) Goffman-inspired facework scale was designed to capture both overt im/politeness and, more importantly, strategically ambivalent facework strategies that afford users a level of plausible deniability, allowing them to manipulate others' views of their target(s) without being found to have acted impolitely (Archer 2011. Cross-examining lawyers, facework and the adversarial courtroom. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(13). 3216–3230). This paper nonetheless proposes an enhancement: the addition of a third "ambiguous-as-to-speaker-intent" space between the "intentional" face enhancing (FE) and face threatening (FT) zones. This third space complements the two "ambiguous-as-to-speaker-intent" spaces already sitting between the "intentional" and "incidental" FE zones and between the "intentional" and "incidental" FT zones of Archer's original scale (cf. Goffman 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books). We demonstrate the utility of what has effectively become a *facework loop* using fourteen comments made by Donald Trump – a globally known figure regularly associated with overt impoliteness – from the 1990s onwards (some of which were deemed more controversial than others). Our primary foci, in consequence, are those facework moves that leave targets and/or audiences uncertain as to whether praise and/or criticism and/or something more politic was intended by him.

Keywords: Donald Trump; facework loop; functionally ambiguous facework; strategic ambiguity

1 Introduction

Ambiguity is both a fundamental and fascinating property of language. Linguistically, it can operate at a lexical, structural, semantic, pragmatic and/or (macro)

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discursive level and, due to such flexibility, tends to be of interest to various sub-disciplines of linguistics as well as to other academic disciplines like new criticism, narrative criminology and the political sciences. Such researchers have considered its creative/entertaining uses both within fictional works (Empson 1930; Short 1996) and as part of everyday banter (or conversational humour) episodes (Dynel and Sinkeviciute 2021; Sinkeviciute 2019), for instance, as well as its strategic use within celebrity-focused chat shows (Tolson 2001). Strategic ambiguity has also been studied in relation to "politician speak", with researchers pointing out how politicians often avoid personal and/or party accountability via their linguistic choices, while nonetheless attempting to appeal to multiple audiences simultaneously, manage controversial issues and/or provide themselves (and/or their party, government, etc.) with (some) plausible deniability (see, e.g., the work of Bavelas et al. 1990; Bull 2008; Chilton 2004; Eisenberg 1984; Wodak 2021). Crime narratologists (see, e.g., Poppi and Sandberg 2023; Poppi and Verde 2021) have further shown how ambiguous discourse(s) can become a linguistic resource through which perpetrators manage their own and others' moral evaluations and (social/personal) responsibilities, sometimes to the point of them presenting themselves as the "real victim" and their actual victims as culpable (or their crimes as inevitable). This paper focuses on ambiguity too – albeit on a special type of strategic ambiguity to do with *facework intent* – in line with our primary objective. In essence, we re-evaluate before offering an amendment to Archer's (2015) Goffman-inspired facework scale in the light of recent developments in third-wave im/politeness studies, especially those focusing on phenomena involving conversational humour, functionally ambiguous mixed messaging, etc. Archer's (2015) facework scale was designed to capture and thereby enhance our understanding of multiple facework phenomena. This includes oft-discussed facework like the use of *slurs*, whose dual capacity means they can function as conventionalised *insult* formulae but also as *banter* or *teasing* expressing approval/affection, depending on their context of use (see, e.g., Culpeper 2011: 135; Haugh and Bousfield 2012: 1,108–1,110). An additional focus pursued by Archer, though, was the strategically ambivalent facework strategies designed to deliberately afford users a level of plausible deniability (Leech 2014: 236) such that the users were able to manipulate others' views of their target(s) while sidestepping accusations of overt impoliteness (Archer 2011). This paper nonetheless proposes (what we believe is) an important enhancement. Namely, the addition of a third "ambiguous-as-to-speaker-intent" space between the "intentional face enhancing" (FE) and face threatening (FT) zones of the original scale, turning the latter into a facework loop. This third space complements the two "ambiguous-as-to-speaker-intent" spaces already sitting between the "intentional" and "incidental" FE zones and between the "intentional" and "incidental" FT zones (cf. Goffman 1967). We are proposing this enhancement due to the persistent difficulty encountered in analysing certain

ambiguous facework behaviours – especially *back-handed compliments* (see Sections 2.1 and 7) and *functionally ambiguous teasing* (see Section 7).

We demonstrate the utility of the *scale-cum-loop* by analysing fourteen public scandals spanning Donald J. Trump's career as a real estate tycoon, celebrity and US president. Our reasoning for focusing on Trump is a practical one. He is a globally known figure, with a now-notorious rhetorical style that includes notable idiosyncratic approaches to delivering FT comments (see McIntosh 2020; Tyrkkö and Frisk 2020), FE comments (as reported on by journalists such Quealy 2018; Withnall 2016) and comments where it is indeterminable whether the primary facework function is FT or FE (see Section 7). Trump is not the only (populist) politician to have used such strategies in his rhetoric, of course.[1] However, he is arguably unique among (even populist) politicians when it comes to his ability to maintain constant (social as well as mainstream) media – and, hence, public – attention. He is thus an important part of the global (political) consciousness whose antics help to provide researchers like us with high-quality and easily accessible data to scrutinise. What also makes Trump an excellent resource for the purpose of this paper is his crafting of a specific persona for himself over decades, be it through books like *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (Trump and Schwartz 1987), when he was best known as a businessman and entrepreneur; through TV reality shows like the US version of *The Apprentice* on NBC from 2004 to 2015, which turned him into a popular culture icon; and, more recently still, through Truth Social (his own social media site), X (formerly Twitter), TV interviews, press briefings and political rallies – first as a political candidate, next as a Republican nominee and finally as the 45th and 47th President of the United States.

Researchers like Sclafani (2018) demonstrate how Trump's persona has remained relatively fixed over this period. As president, he has been described as having a "stereotypically hypermasculine" style that "does not differ substantially from" his style on *The Apprentice* (Sclafani 2018: 5), for instance. This straight-talking, tough-guy persona sees him speaking directly, drawing on the kinds of bald-on-record strategies highlighted in Brown and Levinson (1987).[2] Paradoxically, he also engages in (frequently hyperbolic) face-enhancing behaviours – especially when he perceives his target(s) to be part of his in-crowd/favoured groups (Hall et al. 2016; Lakoff 2017; Mercieca 2020). This has implications for the facework strategies Trump regularly uses and, hence, is most associated with. Additionally, this paper reveals that Trump has drawn upon functionally ambiguous conversational humour in a range of activity

1 Other politicians who have been investigated for using similar strategies include Silvio Berlusconi (Wodak et al. 2021) and Beppe Grillo of Italy (Bortoluzzi and Semino 2016), various members of the Freedom Party of Austria (Wodak 2021) and even former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (Bourgeois 2026).

2 See Bourgeois (2026) for an in-depth analysis of tough-guy politicians from the Metropolitan New York area.

types from the 1990s onwards. Functionally ambiguous *conversational humour* is the umbrella term used by im/politeness researchers to cover a variety of verbal behaviours, including (but not limited to) *teasing*, *banter*, *putdowns* and *self-denigrating humour* (for an overview, see Dynel and Sinkeviciute 2021).

Our use of a dataset that is representative of a range of activity types is not problematic in our view. After all, discursive constructions of a "celebrity identity" and even a "political identity" in 21st-century American politics must remain constant enough across a range of activities to constitute "a […] recognizable" and thus successful "*branded* […] style" (Sclafani 2018: 23 [our italics]). However, readers should not assume, from this, that the paper will therefore offer a systematic modelling of Trump's public rhetoric, as the paper's primary aim remains that of explaining the motivation(s) for our modification to Archer's (2015) Goffmanian-inspired facework scale (see Section 2). We explain the different "scandals" making up our dataset in Section 3. This is followed by our analysis of the data in Sections 4–7. Sections 4–6 concentrate on the data that fit into the spaces already introduced in Archer's (2015) facework scale. Section 7 focuses on the new "ambiguous-as-to-speaker-intent" space between the intentional FT and FE zones by analysing occasions where Trump was deliberately/strategically ambiguous as to his primary facework intent, with the result that it was difficult – on those occasions – to conclude, categorically, that he was "doing" politeness or impoliteness (Archer 2011).[3]

2 Situating our approach to face threat, face enhancement and ambiguous facework

Im/politeness research "has undergone considerable changes since the publication of the pioneering study by Brown and Levinson" (Jucker 2020: 9), briefly noted above. So much so, in fact, that the field is now described using the aforementioned three waves metaphor (see Culpeper and Hardaker 2017), with the third wave equating to a "consolidation between the first and the second wave" (i.e., combining both the classic and discursive approaches to the study of im/politeness) (Jucker 2020: 11). Third-wave researchers recognise that "linguistic forms" like, for example, conventionalised insults "generally have default values", although they still need to "be contextually verified" (Jucker 2020: 11) to determine whether they are "doing" im/politeness in practice. Archer (2015) exemplifies this by offering her Goffman-

3 See Hodges (2020) and Mercieca (2020) for detailed discussion on plausible deniability strategies used by Trump both deliberately and retroactively.

inspired facework model to explain how and why terms like *nigger* and *faggot* can be used to express mock impoliteness by interactants who share the same in-group status and thus be understood, by them, to be markers of approval, affection and/or bonding in context.

In providing a useful means of capturing FE and FT strategies, as well as combinations thereof, the facework scale has proven to be a useful means of also explaining how and why some strategically ambivalent facework strategies afford their user a level of plausible deniability (Leech 2014: 236), such that they can manipulate others' views of a target (or targets) without explicitly being seen to "do" im/politeness (Archer 2011). Archer's work is reflective of an increased interest in facework behaviour, over the past two decades or so, which is "ambiguous with regard to its interpersonal valence" (Grainger and O'Driscoll 2022: 5). Such an interest is unsurprising, of course, when one considers the complexity of the phenomena that ambiguous facework can encapsulate. Pillière (2018: 142) uses terms such as "good-humoured mockery […] jocular talk", "unpleasant taunting", "offensive, inappropriate joking, even bullying", for instance, further explaining that they can only be teased apart by (understanding the relationships between) the participants involved. The most frequently used term to describe mock im/politeness in the im/politeness literature appears to be *teasing* (Haugh 2017), followed by *banter* (Leech 1983, 2014). However, other labels for such behaviours also abound. Boxer and Contés-Conde (1997: 276) highlight everything "from bonding to nipping to biting", for instance, while Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) conceptualise a pragmatic space of insults ranging from "flyting" to "flaming" (albeit with diachronic data in mind). Similarly, Dynel (2008) seems to prefer the term "putdown humour"; Martin et al. (2003) like to distinguish between "aggressive" and "affiliative humour"; and Haugh and Bousfield (2012) differentiate "jocular abuse" from "jocular mockery". Such phenomena challenge many of the current im/politeness models due to, first, the difficulty encountered in unequivocally defining them and, second, their tendencies to be interpreted varyingly and often contentiously so.

In addressing such phenomena in this paper, we follow the pattern of using the most common terms (in both the extant literature and in common parlance): *teasing* and *banter*. As is (now) well known, early theoretical accounts for these phenomena were presented in a relatively straight-forward manner: a person would say something that was (i) obviously impolite (in its form) and (ii) obviously untrue (in its facework intent) – which would lead interlocutors to interpret it as banter, for instance (see the "Banter Principle" in Leech 1983: 144–145). While a useful point of departure for the investigation of such phenomena, O'Driscoll (2024: 186) convincingly demonstrates that many phenomena labelled as "banter" or "teasing" are not as straightforwardly analysable as Leech outlined in his 1983 publication. To illustrate this point, O'Driscoll (2024: 190–195) demonstrates the complexity of ambiguous

impoliteness behaviours through an in-depth analysis of a particular instance of intentional banter made by a conference organiser that was varyingly interpreted by different members of the multicultural audience as (i) impolite, (ii) mock impolite or (iii) mock mock-impolite (thus combining elements of both impoliteness and mock impoliteness) based on their interpretations of the conference organiser's affective (non-)seriousness and the propositional (non-)seriousness of his comment.

The notions of banter and teasing are further complicated by conflicting understandings of their primary functions (i.e., comradery or denigration) and disagreements about whether it is possible to precisely define (and, hence, distinguish between) them. Banter and teasing are frequently used interchangeably in British English (see Haugh and Bousfield 2012; O'Driscoll 2024: 185) and are essentially characterised as the ostensive mixing of provocation with non-seriousness (Culpeper et al. 2017: 330; Sinkeviciute 2019: 68). Others who work with data from outside the UK and Ireland tend to prefer to distinguish the two notions, albeit with considerable overlaps. For instance, Sinkeviciute (2019: 106) characterises *teasing* as a single utterance and *banter* as entailing a back-and-forth series of teases involving multiple participants (see also Haugh 2017; Norrick 1993). In our survey of the current literature, *teasing* appears as the preferred term across the extant literature, while *banter* is used less, with some even explicitly suggesting that it should be avoided in im/politeness research altogether (see Dynel 2016: 132).

Concerning their functionalities, banter and teasing are generally conceptualised as serving FE functions in the extant literature (see McIntosh 2020; Sinkeviciute 2019: 106; van der Bom and Mills 2015: 196). However, we have noted a recent uptick in the literature that acknowledges that they can be used within a humorous frame but antisocially or have mixed pro- and anti-social functions simultaneously. This is acknowledged by Culpeper et al. (2017: 326) while discussing "complimentary insults" that both compliment and denigrate the target – albeit with one usually taking prominence over the other. This option of functional ambiguity appears self-evident to us considering the common response used by people embroiled in public talk scandals who minimise their *faux pas* as "just banter" (see examples in Section 2.1 and in Haugh and Culpeper 2018: 222–234; Sinkeviciute 2019: 127). Moreover, even in cases where the speaker's intentions are apparently FE, Haugh (2015: 293) asserts that some conversational participants can interpret mock impoliteness as disguised genuine impoliteness (see also Sinkeviciute 2019: 74). Along similar lines, O'Driscoll (2024: 186) adds to this line of thought by arguing that it seems "intuitively likely that […] what may look like pretend impoliteness can better – or just as likely – be interpreted as impoliteness", something that we investigate explicitly in Section 5 below.

Having taken the above issues into consideration while approaching this paper from a UK perspective, we have chosen to distinguish banter and teasing as follows while also maintaining significant overlaps between the two notions: (i) *banter*, for

us, is more ostensively associated with FE behaviours and (ii) *teasing* is more ambiguous as to the speaker/author's FT and/or FE intentions. Our reasoning behind this decision was made on practical grounds concerning our expansion of Archer's (2015) facework scale. We elaborate more on our rationalisation of this distinction in our critique of the facework scale in Section 2.1 and our analysis of our fourteen examples in Sections 4–7.

2.1 Archer's (2015) facework scale

Archer's (2015) facework scale accounts for strategic face enhancement in addition to strategic face aggravation and everything in between, thanks to Archer first extending Goffman's (1967) *intentional* and *incidental* levels of FT so that they can also serve FE purposes and then adding ambiguous spaces where *intentional* and *incidental* FT and FE zones bleed into each other (see Figure 1).

The ambiguous spaces came into existence because of Archer's (2015: 86) interest in how speakers (i) often "attempt to achieve goals (which are not" necessarily "shared by their interlocutors)" in ways that nonetheless allow them to maintain "an element of plausible deniability (should they require a linguistic means of escape from their 'skirmish')" and (ii) "do not only 'deliberately exploit ambivalence' with verbal aggression in mind", but also do so for "reasons of politeness and expediency". A recent example of someone attempting to use plausible deniability as an "escape hatch", albeit problematically, is that of BBC TV personality Gregg Wallace, who denied making "consistent inappropriate comments" during his participation as a host in competitive cooking show *MasterChef* by stating it was "just banter" (see reporting in Lawes 2024: 3). Archer (2015: 87) has also discussed a less contentious TV example, provided by Ant and Dec during their hosting of *Pop Idol* (aired in the UK, 2001–2003):

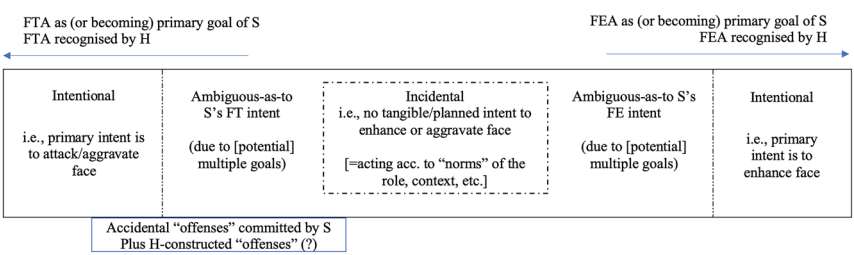

Figure 1: Archer's (2015) facework scale.

Ant: Our judges have been accused of being ill-informed, opinionated and rude.
Dec: We'd like to set the record straight: our judges are not ill-informed.

As the above reveals, the second host (Dec) does not explicitly "set the record straight" with respect to every negative evaluation within the first host's list. Archer (2015: 87) goes on to explain that "flouting the Quantity maxim (Grice 1975) in this (tongue-in-cheek) way constituted banter as opposed to off-record impoliteness in context", as Dec most likely:

> […] wanted the audience to understand that his primary facework intent was to "do" humour that did not so much make the judges *the butt of the joke* but, rather, allowed the judges to collude with the hosts (Ant and Dec), as well as them, in the humorous event (cf. Edelmann 1994: 253). In which case, this particular example can be seen as sitting more within the face-enhancement zones than within the face-aggravation zones of the facework scale. (original emphasis)

Archer (2015: 87) nonetheless explains that which of the FE zones it belongs to will ultimately "depend on whether we (i) believe Dec's communicative intent is overwhelmingly one of face enhancement, or (ii) believe him to have additional communicative intents which served to supersede (i)", adding that "we may […] want to allow for the possibility", for example, "that Dec deliberately left 'the precise force' of his quip 'unclear' so that it might sit on the fuzzy boundary between face enhancement" and other facework strategies. This explains the lack of an "explicit divide between the ambiguous-as-to S's FE intent" space (Archer 2015: 87) and intentional FE zone in Figure 1 (indicated by the broken line). There is also a lack of an explicit divide between the "ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent" space and "intentional FT" zone in Figure 1, which has been argued to account for strategic moves such as back-handed compliments. Archer (2015: 92–93) provides two examples from Graham Scott (2006: 68–69) where an employer combines "apparent 'praise with negative put-downs'" such that the employee was left wondering whether he was being reprimanded rather than complimented. In the first, "David learns that – from Herb's perspective – he was someone who 'screw[ed] up a lot'" but was still conscientious in the sense of "never call[ing] in sick and […] always being at work on time" (emphasis removed). In the second, the FE comment, "That was a great job", was immediately "nullified" due to Herb suggesting this was atypical behaviour on David's part ("I just wish you could be on target more often").

Archer's (2015: 84) facework scale was initially "advanced […] on two interrelated premises". Firstly, "that face enhancement devices such as compliments represent the positive end of a pragmatic space relating to S's evaluation of the addressee, and face aggravating devices like insults and slurs, the negative end" (Archer 2015: 84). This helps to account for flattery being associated with the FE end of

the scale, in Figure 1, and ridicule, abuse and insults being associated with the FT end of the scale. The second premise was that the shared nature of "this […] *evaluative space*" could nonetheless help "to explain why compliment" formulae "can function as insults in context, due to their insincerity (Archer 2010), and insult" formulae, "slurs, etc., can be intended/inferred as banter in context (Culpeper 2005: 43)" (Archer 2015: 84 [original emphasis]). Although Archer was largely successful with respect to the first premise, we believe that the second premise requires us to rethink the (metaphorical) shape of the scale such that it becomes a facework loop, thanks to a third ambiguous space traversing the FT and FE intentional categories (cf. Figure 2):

We believe this better accounts for cases where facework behaviour has both FE and FT components, which hitherto has made unequivocal analysis between them difficult, such as the case of the back-handed compliment involving the employee mentioned above.[4] In the sections that follow, we demonstrate how different facework behaviours sit within this facework loop, drawing specifically on a selection of Donald Trump's (creative) insults, (inappropriate) compliments, functionally ambiguous teasing and a back-handed compliment dating from 1992 to 2024 (see Section 3 for details). Acknowledging that our labels for the Trumpian behaviour analysed in Sections 4–7 below may be controversial, we justify our adoption of these labels in the forthcoming sections. What is most central to our analysis below, and less contentious in our view, is situating many of these labels so that they overlap the "intentional zones" and "ambiguous-as-to S's facework intent" spaces of the facework loop – with some of them, moreover, sitting squarely within the latter.

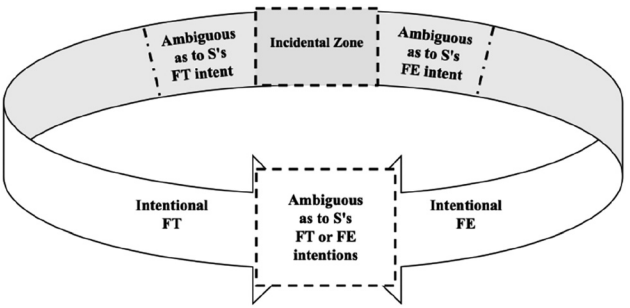

Figure 2: The *facework loop* (adapted from Archer 2015).

4 While Watts (2005: xliii) proposed a loop diagram to model "relational work" across positively marked, negatively marked and unmarked (politic) categories (see also Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2005), we argue that our facework loop is original and relevant because it captures the above-mentioned phenomena and ambiguous FT/FE intentions open to contested interpretations through its three ambiguous zones.

2.2 An argument for needing a facework loop: Trump as an exemplary study

We draw upon examples from Trump, in this paper, for a variety of reasons. To date, most investigations into Trump's public rhetoric have focused on his tendency to be abrasive and impolite. As noted above, Sclafani (2018: 5) has commented upon how Trump's use of bald-on-record strategies is a part of his "stereotypically hypermasculine" style – a style that has "not differ[ed] substantially from" Trump's style on *The Apprentice*. This paper does not set out to contradict the (often-cited) idea that Trump repeatedly uses direct and offensive language. Indeed, it goes without saying that Trump can be and often is impolite. We want to demonstrate, nonetheless, how Trump regularly makes use of a diverse set of FT, FE and ambiguous-as-to-speaker-intent behaviours that can be placed along the entirety of our proposed facework loop – and especially the strategically ambiguous areas – when engaging in publicly focused facework. Indeed, it is his use of ambiguous, creative and hyperbolic language as well as more direct and offensive language, when engaging in publicly oriented facework, that arguably leads researchers like Sclafani (2018) to claim he defies (American) Anglo linguistic norms – thus falling outside of prototypical cultural practices – especially for a US president. Consider Trump's *ad hominem* attacks against political adversaries (Mercieca 2020). This common rhetorical fallacy involves attacking the target rather than the (in)validity of their argument/position: something Trump does often, including by using unfavourable nicknames like "crooked Hillary" (for Hillary Clinton) and "Pocahontas" (for Senator Elizabeth Warren) (see Tyrkkö and Frisk 2020). Trump's FE attempts have attracted considerably less attention in the literature but often employ similar elements of (creative) conversational humour while also targeting sensitive face aspects that are atypical of conventionalised compliments/flattery in formal publicised contexts (see, e.g., Trump's controversial compliments concerning the late Arnold Palmer being "all man", as discussed in Hubbard 2024). Ultimately, this results in varied interpretations of his FE attempts, a topic linguistic studies have largely neglected until now due to their focus on his impoliteness. Such facework should be explored, though, as it contributes to his persona as a different type of president compared to his predecessors: indeed, his base and detractors alike have labelled him the *entertainer-in-chief*. Given Trump is generally thought of as being "one of the most (if not the most) rhetorically unconventional, controversial, and divisive candidates in US presidential history" (Sclafani 2018: 1), we believe a selection of his talk scandals especially provides a fruitful means of testing the facework loop's robustness.[5]

5 See Wodak et al. (2021: 373) and references therein for a summary of "talk scandals".

3 Trump datasets drawn upon

We consulted a variety of sources to compile our Trump data sample. This includes two compilation lists published by the *New York Times*: one listing Trump's insults on X (formerly Twitter) (Quealy 2021) and another listing the people, places and things that he has complimented on X (Quealy 2018). For more recent Trumpian insults against his Republican rivals during the 2024 Republican primary season, we consulted Lee (2024). Concerning his tendencies of complimenting and attacking men and women, we also consulted a list of 81 comments made by Trump concerning women from the 1990s to 2026 that are featured in an article in *The Week Magazine* (Schwartz 2026) and a *New York Times* article by McKinley (2024) that explores how he makes comments about men. To locate cases of conversational banter, teasing and back-handed compliments, which are inherently more common in interpersonal exchanges, we also include data from episode one of series 13 of *Celebrity Apprentice*, the format of the later series of *The Apprentice* (US) TV programme (Burnett and Trump 2013). Such exchanges were particularly prominent in this episode. Indeed, it contains controversial Trumpian facework that was deemed to be highly problematic by journalists both at the time that the episode aired in 2013 and retroactively when Trump entered politics (see Halberstadt 2016; Schwartz 2026).

From the hundreds of cases of alleged Trumpian behaviours that include insults, compliments, banter, teasing and back-handed compliments that we found via the sources mentioned above, we have identified fourteen examples that we go on to situate in detail within our facework loop in Sections 4–7, below. When possible, we accessed the original sources of the utterances or social media posts that we selected to ensure that we got the most reliable information (see Tables 1–4). However, as we insisted at the outset, we do not wish to claim that these examples are representative of Trump's entire rhetorical repertoire *per se*. Instead, we claim that analysing these fourteen examples gives us a unique opportunity to test the robustness of our facework loop and to outline a wider range of facework behaviours for readers in one paper that (to our knowledge) has not been discussed collectively, hitherto, in relation to Trump's public persona. The selection of these examples was guided by three practical criteria: (i) inclusion of multiple clear instances of FT and FE (i.e., standardised insults, implicational impoliteness and compliments) and various types of ambiguous facework that could serve to test the applicability of the (now) three ambiguous spaces of the facework loop (see behaviours discussed in Sections 5 and 7 especially); (ii) evidence of substantial press scrutiny, providing support for our categorisations based on public reactions rather than researcher intuitions alone; and (iii) a focus on examples not yet analysed in detail in the extant literature.

We present summaries of our fourteen examples in Tables 1–4, organised according to the types of facework by which we categorise them in Sections 4–7.

Table 1: Trumpian examples of *intentional FT* (i.e., impoliteness).

Example #	Example summary	Date	Source	Position on facework loop
(1)	Trump calls former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley "birdbrain"	03/03/2024	Truth social	Intentional FT zone (see *standardised insults* in Figure 3)
(2)	Trump attacks Sen. Rand Paul's appearance via paralipsis (see discussion in Section 4)	16/09/2015	2nd Republican primary debate	Intentional FT zone (see *implicational impoliteness* in Figure 3)
(3)	Trump implies that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is controlled by his wife	08/11/2022	*Wall Street Journal* interview (see Leary 2022)	Intentional FT zone (see *implicational impoliteness* in Figure 3)

Unless otherwise stated in this column of Tables 1–4, all complete social media posts, debates and rally speeches can be consulted via Factba.se (2017–).

Table 2: Trumpian examples of FT behaviours approaching or leaning into the *ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent* zone.

Example #	Example summary	Date	Source	Position on facework loop
(4)	Trump denies calling Gov. Ron DeSantis "Meatball Ron" but repeats the nickname twice (see discussion of paralipsis in Section 5 below)	18/02/2023	Truth social	Just to the left of the ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zone (see *thinly veiled insults* in Figure 4)
(5)	Trump calls former Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao "Coco Chow"	04/06/2023	Truth social	Just to the left of the ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zone (see *thinly veiled insults* in Figure 4)
(6)	Trump calls (former) Sen. Bob Corker "Liddle Bob Corker"	10/10/2017	X/Twitter	Straddling the fuzzy boundary between intentional FT and ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zones (see *humorously ambiguous insults* in Figure 4)
(7)	Trump calls 2020 democratic presidential hopefuls Joe Biden "Sleepy Joe" and Pete Buttigieg "Alfred E. Neuman" (i.e., the mascot of *Mad Magazine*)	11/07/2019	X/Twitter	Straddling fuzzy boundary of the intentional FT and ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zones (see *humorously ambiguous insults* in Figure 4)

Table 3: Trumpian examples that fit into the *intentional FE zone* that overlap into the *accidental faux pas committed by speaker* zone.

Example #	Example summary	Date	Source	Position on facework loop
(8)	Trump calls American football punter Tory Taylor a "beautiful, big, strong physical specimen"	13/12/2023	Campaign speech in Coralville, Iowa	Overlapping the intentional FE and accidental *faux pas* zones (see *Trumpian Flattery* in Figure 5)
(9)	Trump repeatedly compliments French first lady Brigitte Macron as being in "great shape"	13/07/2017	State visit in Paris, France (see Moon 2017; Schwartz 2026)	Overlapping the intentional FE and accidental *faux pas* zones (see *Trumpian flattery* in Figure 5)
(10)	Trump calls his daughter Ivanka one of the "great beauties of the world" with the "best body"	23/07/2003	Howard Stern interview (see Schwartz 2026; Withnall 2016)	Overlapping the intentional FE and accidental *faux pas* zones (see *Trumpian flattery* in Figure 5)
(11)	Trump agrees with shock jock Howard Stern's metonymic assessment of his daughter, Ivanka, as "a piece of ass"	07/01/2004	Howard Stern interview (see Schwartz 2026; Withnall 2016)	Overlapping the intentional FE and accidental *faux pas* zones (see *Trumpian Flattery* in Figure 5)

Table 1 lists the examples that we place into the intentional FT zone. As we explain in Section 4, we have identified these impolite behaviours as falling into Culpeper's (2011) broad categories of "impoliteness formulae" and "implicational impoliteness". These Trumpian attacks were understood by the public at large, as well as the targets, as overt cases of impoliteness (thus fitting into the intentional FT zone well) and mirror the sorts of impolite behaviours that have hitherto been one of the primary areas of enquiry on Trump, as mentioned in 2.2 above.

Examples (4)–(7) in Table 2 focus on the types of Trumpian insults that we place in the fuzzy boundary area between the intentional FT and the ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zones of the facework loop. They entail varying levels of strategic ambiguity. Some of these examples, such as (4) and (5), demonstrate only a shallow level of plausible deniability of vicious FT intent – what we call *thinly veiled insults* – that, though easily recognisable as intentionally FT, were also uniquely constructed and thus more difficult to definitively label as such (cf. the examples found in Table 1). Examples (6) and (7), on the other hand, are more characteristically humorous in

Table 4: Trumpian examples that fit (partially or fully) into the *ambiguous-as-to S's FT or FE intentions* zone.

Example #	Example summary	Date	Source	Position on facework loop
(12)	Trump tells actress and model Brande Roderick that it would be "a pretty picture" to see her "drop to her knees"	03/03/2013	*Celebrity Apprentice USA*, series 13, Ep.1 (Burnett and Trump 2013)	Overlapping the ambiguous-as-to S's FT or FE intentions and the intentional FE zones (see *functionally ambiguous teasing* in Figure 6)
(13)	Trump calls *Apprentice* contestant Omarosa Manigault Newman "vicious" and "like a snake" yet also professes that he "loves" her because of her loyalty towards him	03/03/2013	*Celebrity Apprentice USA*, series 13, Ep.1 (Burnett and Trump 2013)	Ambiguous-as-to S's FT or FE intentions (see *back-handed compliments* in Figure 6)
(14)	Trump tells rock star Bret Michaels that "we don't give a shit about you not being racist"	03/03/2013	*Celebrity Apprentice USA*, series 13, Ep.1 (Burnett and Trump 2013)	Overlapping the ambiguous-as-to S's FT or FE intentions and the intentional FE zones (see *functionally ambiguous teasing* in Figure 6)

their construction – what we call *humorously ambiguous insults* – and were also received by their targets (as well as the public) with (comparatively more) humour. Like the examples from Table 1, examples similar to those found in (4)–(7) have also received attention in the recent literature on Trump's rhetoric, particularly concerning his creation of unique nicknames for adversaries (see Section 2.2). Nonetheless, we identify a broader range of ambiguity in Trump's nicknames than previously observed, which we discuss in detail in Section 5.

Cases (8)–(11), shown in Table 3, demonstrate some notorious cases of Trump's attempts at flattery over previous decades (see *Trumpian flattery* in Figure 5). While cases such as these have been commented upon frequently in the popular press (e.g., Quealy 2018; Schwartz 2026), they have been neglected in the extant academic literature. Trumpian flattery is worthy of our attention, nonetheless, as it is illustrative of how facework can be recognised as intentionally FE yet still (potentially) cause discomfort or even offense to both the targeted interlocutors and overhearing audience(s), particularly when they violate cultural norms and expectations, such as making comments about people's – and most particularly women's – appearances in

public (see Allan and Burridge 2006: 239). This adds significant nuances to the conceptualisation of this accidental zone as originally proposed by Archer (2011: 3,227, 2015: 94), following Goffman (1967). We elaborate on this in detail in Section 6.

Finally, Table 4 addresses examples that fit into the new ambiguous space that turns Archer's previous facework scale into a facework loop (i.e., the ambiguous-as-to-the S's FT or FE intentions space). As mentioned above, these examples come from an episode of *Celebrity Apprentice* from 2013. This includes what we label as *functionally ambiguous teasing*, which we distinguish from *FE banter* in that it is difficult to determine if the intended message is supposed to be primarily FT and FE to the person(s) being targeted. It is for this reason that we place cases of functionally ambiguous teasing along the fuzzy border of this new zone and the intentional FE zone. Back-handed compliments are placed into this space as well, though we place them squarely into this zone. Our rationale for how we define and place these two phenomena within this area of the facework loop is discussed in greater detail in Section 7.

We explore these examples in the order that we do for practical reasons. As is evident in our summary of the data in Tables 1–4, the examples from Tables 1–3 all fit into Archer's (2015) conceptualisation of the facework scale, while the examples from Table 4 are placed into the new ambiguous space introduced in Figure 2. This allows us to test the resilience and enhance our conceptualisation of the original zones of Archer's (2015) facework scale and provide an initial test of applicability to our newly proposed ambiguous space (i.e., ambiguous-as-to S's FT or FE intentions) using real-world empirical data.

4 Intentional FT (gender-based) examples

In this section, we analyse three examples that fit into both the intentional FT category of our facework loop (as shown in Figure 3) and Archer's 2015 facework scale (see Figure 1). Examples (1)–(3) below contain unambiguous impoliteness (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011) that the targets and overhearing audiences alike overwhelmingly interpreted as not only FT but as being intentionally expressed as such by Trump. A common intentional FT category drawn upon by Trump involves targeting sensitive aspects of individuals' faces. When taking on female adversaries, we found, like Schwartz (2026), that he regularly attacked their appearances and/or intellectual capacities (and often in on-record ways). This is evident in (1) below in which Trump utilises the standardised insult, *birdbrain*, to belittle the intelligence of

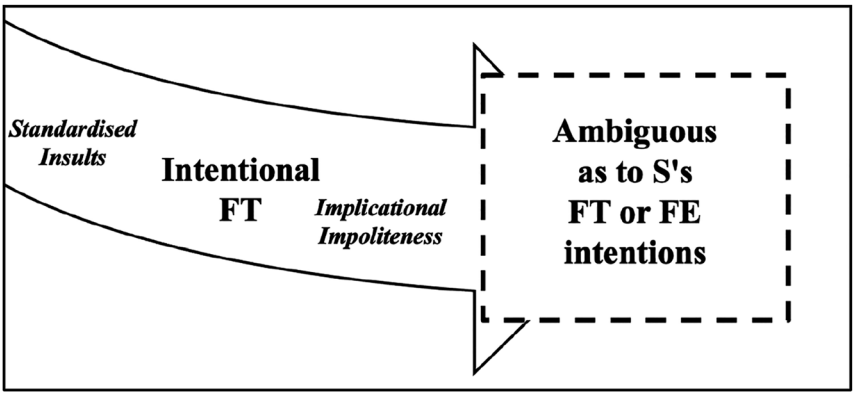

Figure 3: Intentional FT zone of the facework loop with "standardised insults" and "implicational impoliteness" mapped onto it.

his 2024 Republican primary adversary, former UN Ambassador and Governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley.

(1) *Birdbrain [Nikki Haley] is a loser, record low performance in virtually every State. […] I enjoy watching the Bird disavow her PLEDGE to the RNC and her statement that she would NEVER run against President Trump ("A great President"). Well, she ran, she lied, and she LOST BIG!*
(Truth Social Post, 03/03/2024)

When attacking male adversaries, we found examples of Trump attacking their appearances too – but often more indirectly, via implicature.

(2) *I never attacked him [Senator Rand Paul] on his look [sic], and believe me, there's plenty of subject matter right there [laughter]. That I can tell you.*
(Second debate for 2016 Republican primaries, 16/09/2015)

Example (2) is also intriguing because he initially denies making fun of Senator Rand Paul's appearance before immediately doing so via implicature (see discussion of Trump's use of paralipsis in Mercieca 2020: Ch. 5).

Trump's FT (as well as FE) comments about men have garnered much media attention since his entrance into politics (see McKinley 2024). Example (3) below highlights a second strategy that Trump relies on when criticising men. It is one, moreover, that effectively aligns him with hypermasculinity because of its adherence to traditional masculine traits (see Sclafani 2018; Waugh 2025). In (3), Trump implies that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis – his then competitor for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination – is a weak man due to being controlled by his

wife (who was framed as "really running" DeSantis' campaign). Trump makes a similar comment concerning Mitch McConnell's relationship with his spouse in (5) below as well.

(3) *I know more about him [Ron DeSantis] than anybody other than perhaps his wife, who is really running his campaign.*
(*Wall Street Journal* interview, 08/11/2022)

Examples (1)–(3) are all ostensively FT in nature and are reasonably recognisable as including either common impoliteness insult formulae (i.e., standardised insults) or implicational impoliteness (see Culpeper 2011: Ch. 4–Ch. 5). Therefore, they fit well within the intentional FT zone of our loop (see Figure 3) and Archer's scale (cf. Figure 1). In Section 5 we move on to examples entailing ambiguity as to FT intent and show where we map those into the loop.

5 More ambiguous FTs

This section analyses four cases of Trumpian FT that utilise different levels of strategic ambiguity, making categorical interpretations of Trump's primary target of his FT messages (more) difficult. The focus here is therefore on the fuzzy boundary region between the intentional FT and ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent spaces. The extant literature has already revealed Trump's frequent use of creative nicknames to attack his adversaries' face(s), as discussed in Section 2.2 above. It is worth noting two things at this point, nonetheless. Firstly, we seem to have identified a broader range of ambiguity in Trump's nicknames than previously observed. As we show in Figure 4, we have categorised the Trumpian nicknames shown in (4)–(7) into *thinly veiled insults* and *humorously ambiguous insults*, which we differentiate from standardised insults, as found in (1) above (i.e., "birdbrain"). Secondly, such a distinction in FT intensity has been largely ignored to date (perhaps because of the public's elevated interest in the more problematic examples of Trump's creative digs).

Due to space restrictions, we confine our discussion to examples (4)–(7) and concentrate on Trumpian nicknames that attack his targets' sensitive face aspects, including their ethnicities, gender roles and appearances. We have categorised (4) and (5), which attack people based on their ethnicities, as thinly veiled insults for reasons discussed below. Note, too, that (4) and (5) involved Trump attacking fellow Republican colleagues: (4) targeted Ron DeSantis, while (5) attacked his former Secretary of Transportation, Elaine Chao.

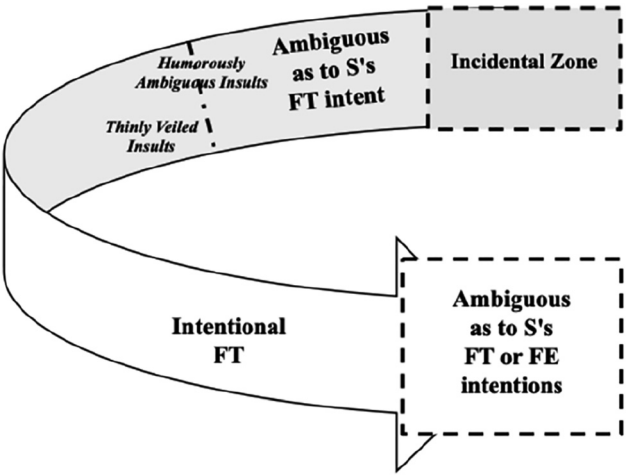

Figure 4: The FT side of the facework loop with "thinly veiled insults" and "humorously ambiguous insults" mapped onto it.

(4) *I will never call Ron DeSanctimonious "Meatball" Ron, as the Fake News is insisting I will. […] it would be totally inappropriate to use the word "meatball" as a moniker for Ron!*
(Truth Social post, 18/02/2023)

(5) *If Republicans are going to fight, we ought to be fighting Mitch McConnell and his domineering, China loving BOSS, I mean wife, Coco Chow. The harm they have done to the Republican Party is incalculable…*
(Truth Social post, 04/06/2023)

The creation processes and illocutionary and pragmatic force behind Trump's use of the compound *Meatball Ron* (in [4]) is more straightforward in its construction compared to *DeSanctimonious* (also in [4]) and *Coco Chow* (in [5]). *Meatball Ron* targets multiple aspects of DeSantis' face. As *meatball* can be both a cultural reference to popular Italian American cuisine and a common nickname for a short and often dim-witted person, it digs at his Italian American heritage and the circulating rumours that he was wearing height-boosting cowboy boots to make him taller (Guy 2023).[6] *Coco Chow* requires more explanation because it entails sophisticated intertextual references and creative blending. *Coco Chow* is a blend of the name of the French businesswoman Coco Chanel and *chow*, the Cantonese term for *stir fry*

6 This nickname was brought into the national consciousness in the 2010s in pop culture thanks to the *Jersey Shore* reality TV stars Nicole Polizzi and Deena Cortese (see Polizzi and Cortese 2023).

(which is also a homophone for Elaine Chao's family name). The pragmatic force behind this insult thus associates her with both the fashion designer Coco Chanel – who allegedly collaborated with the Nazi occupiers of France during the Second World War – and China (even though she emigrated to the USA from Taiwan). *DeSanctimonious* is created via blending (i.e., *DeSantis* and *sanctimonious*) and alludes to a negative evaluation of DeSantis' personality on Trump's part. Nicknames such as *Coco Chow*, *DeSanctimonious* and others like *Nimbra,* coined for Nikki Haley, thus use creative manipulations of people's names to insult them in a personalised way while simultaneously highlighting their ethnic backgrounds and, hence, *foreignness* (Barrow 2024; McGraw 2023).

These nicknames therefore highlight some interesting insights into Trump's methods of insulting. Their creative coinage targets multiple face aspects simultaneously, obscuring what is primarily being ridiculed. This conveniently gives Trump an "escape hatch", should people complain that his nicknames are ethnically insensitive (or racist), which was indeed the reaction to Trump's use of these nicknames at the time (see Barrow 2024). Case (4) exemplifies additional ways that Trumpian insults can prove problematic to nail down in facework terms because of Trump's apparent claim to never call DeSantis "Meatball Ron" (i.e., his use of paralipsis: Mercieca 2020) and the assignment of this "moniker" to the "Fake News" media outlets instead. The ambiguity relating to whose actions these are provides Trump with some plausible deniability, of course, allowing him to frame any unwanted reciprocations as "overblown" on the target's part, should they be forthcoming.

Other Trumpian nicknames contain more (playfully) foregrounded humour behind them and thus prove to be less controversial publicly than examples like (4) and (5). This is exemplified in the use of nicknames in (6) and (7), which we have categorised as *humorously ambiguous insults*. In (6), Trump produces an infantilised realisation of *little* as "liddle". Here it is used as a dig pointing to former Tennessee Senator Bob Corker's shortness. Similar points can be made concerning the nicknames in (7) against 2020 Democratic primary candidates Joe Biden and the then Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg. These nicknames once again denigrate individual characteristics of their targets (i.e., Biden's age/energy level and Buttigieg's supposed resemblance to the *Mad Magazine* mascot Alfred E. Neuman, especially concerning his ears). However, the offensiveness potential of making fun of the height, energy level, age or ear size of other male politicians is less socially tabooed than going after a person's ethnicity and/or attacking the appearances of women (see the discussion about the taboos in Anglo societies against making digs against the

appearances of women and issues concerning ethnic backgrounds in Allan and Burridge 2006: 239).

(6) *The Failing @nytimes set Liddle' [sic] Bob Corker up by recording his conversation. Was made to sound a fool, and that's what I am dealing with!* (X/Twitter post, 10/10/2017)

(7) *[…] Could you imagine having Sleepy Joe Biden, or Alfred E. Newman [sic] […] rather than what you have now, so great looking and smart, a true Stable Genius! Sorry to say that even Social Media would be driven out of business along with, and finally, the Fake News Media!* (X/Twitter post, 11/07/2019)

The dysphemistic nicknames in (6) and (7) resemble schoolyard taunts or benign locker room talk (see Cameron 2020). Not only are there elements of playful humour in them, but they also target the more benign face aspects of their targets. This makes these insulting nicknames less ostensively offensive and thus arguably more strategically ambivalent than (4) and (5) – as reflected in these examples receiving considerably less outrage from the press and even triggering (more) light-hearted responses from the targets themselves. Biden, for instance, reappropriated the Sleepy Joe nickname rhetorically during the 2020 campaign (see Manchester 2019). Buttigieg smirked when asked about his opinion of Trump's nickname for him in 2019 and even suggested that it was "kind of funny" (Lippman et al. 2019). Looking at these cases from an affective non-seriousness and propositional non-seriousness angle – that is, the two dimensions involved in the interpretation of jocularly humorous utterances proposed by O'Driscoll (2024: 195) – a case can be made that Trump's creative FT strategies toy with the propositional nonseriousness dimension particularly, while his affective stance is considerably less ambiguous.

The examples discussed in this section highlight how Trump uses ambiguity combined with humour to *sugarcoat* the offensiveness of some of his nicknames. Doing this is effective because it plays with the popular conception that humour should not be taken seriously because humour itself is "non-serious", providing people with a veneer of plausible deniability (via which they might claim they are still within the bounds of allowable contributions, given the activity type – see Thomas 2013 [1995]: 190–192). In practice, of course, it is not so simple to unequivocally distinguish between what is *serious*, and what is *humorously non-serious*, as Dynel (2017: 99) convincingly demonstrates. Moreover, Trump's distinctive face-attacking style foregrounds these strategies, allowing multiple potential interpretations. In fact, creative impoliteness has been shown to generate uncertainty and contested interpretations in fictional dialogue, particularly over whether it is

intended primarily as a serious (i.e., offensive) or non-serious (i.e., humorous) frame (Bousfield and McIntyre 2018). While the ambiguity and multifunctionality of these nicknames leaves potential for varied interpretations, it also offers a convenient escape hatch from being labelled "vicious" by a sizeable segment of (American) society (Archer 2015).

However, as we have discussed above, not all nicknames benefit from the same amount of plausible deniability – thus our rationale for distinguishing thinly veiled insults from humorously ambiguous insults, the latter of which we place so that it straddles the fuzzy border between the intentional FT zone and the ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zone, while the former sits along the border of intentional and ambiguous-as-to S's FT intent zone but on the intentionally FT side (see Figure 4). It is notable that we did not find any cases, thus far at least, of Trump coining nicknames that contain standardised slurs or other conventionalised language that are unambiguously linked with ethnic, sexist or other forms of prejudice, which undoubtedly would have caused even greater controversy in society than we have noted here in response to the cases discussed in (4)–(7).[7]

Interestingly, similar observations regarding how people react to socially disruptive behaviours are found in Poppi and Sandberg (2023), who investigated how people rationalised criminal behaviours relating to organised crime in Italy. According to the authors, the stories that members of society use to understand complex issues surrounding crime and anti-social behaviour contribute to making the moral evaluation of such circumstances "inherently flexible, context-dependent, and negotiable" (153), although they also note that there are limits to how far this moral ambiguity can be applied.[8] These insights appear directly applicable to (some of) the Trumpian behaviour discussed in this section, as his supporters often emphasise the dual nature of his conduct (i.e., they acknowledge that he is abrasive but appreciate that he communicates informally and without a traditional politician's filter), as discussed in detail in Bourgeois and Bousfield (2026) and Archer (in press).

7 Tyrkkö and Frisk (2020: 118–124) make similar observations in their investigation on Trumpian nicknames. For discussion on a particular case where Trump received considerable pushback for using a controversial nickname, see Bourgeois and Bousfield (2026: Ch. 4).

8 For instance, Poppi and Sandberg (2023: 152) found that their participants who discussed organised crime in Italy had certain areas in which moral ambiguity was suspended in favour of "a clearer distinction between good and evil". This included cases where children and entire communities were victimised.

6 Untangling intentional and ambiguous-as-to-intent FE

In this section we discuss the FE side of our loop, particularly regarding how to untangle the intentional and ambiguous-as-to S's FE intent areas. As was the case in the phenomena analysed in Sections 4 and 5, these areas are also found in Archer's (2015) facework scale. As previously mentioned, Trump's uses of FE can be challenging to analyse because of it being multifunctional (as we saw with his FT behaviours) in conjunction with his tendency to target the same sensitive aspects of face that we find in his FT attempts: in particular, people's appearances. A potential gender difference, nonetheless, is that men (and boys) are often associated with their physical ability and/or strength. Trump likes to describe men he favours and/or likes as "big", "strong" and sometimes both (see McKinley 2024).

(8) *We have this beautiful, big, strong physical specimen.* [*Stated of football punter, Tory Taylor*]
(Campaign stop in Coralville, IA, 13/12/2023)

Women (and girls), in contrast, tend to be associated with their "shape" and/or sexuality (see also Schwartz 2026). Consequently, when Trump attempts to flatter women, he frequently does so by emphasising their looks or perceived sex appeal. For instance, during his state visit to France in 2017, Trump made use of both hyperbole and repetition to tell the then sixty-four-year-old wife of President Macron the following:

(9) *You know what, you are in such great shape (turns to the others to reaffirm): She is in such great shape. It's beautiful!*
(Paris state visit, 13/07/2017)

Precisely why Trump felt the need to single out Brigitte Macron's physical shape given he – and thus Brigitte also – were in their public-facing roles at the time (cf. a private space, where comments on *looking great* might have been more appropriate) was given considerable attention in the press at the time and continues to be brought up retrospectively to exemplify his problematic history regarding how he treats and talks about women (Moon 2017; Schwartz 2026: para 24).

Other examples are more problematic still because of their societal inappropriacy – thereby highlighting the importance of a facework model that can account for analysts/audiences having different assessments of Trump's (seemingly intended) compliments. For instance, Trump likes to praise his daughter, Ivanka – something that has received substantial retroactive press attention since his entrance into politics. In two different interviews with the famous shock jock

Howard Stern (see 10 and 11), Trump discussed her attractiveness in ways that were meant to be FE, but which were nonetheless unusual considering the norms and expectations surrounding how a father talks about his daughter. In fact, many journalists went on to describe Trump's comments as "creepy", "cringy", "gross" and "unsettling" (Adkins 2023; Withnall 2016).

(10) *You know who's one of the great beauties of the world, according to everybody? And I helped create her. Ivanka. My daughter, Ivanka. She's 6 feet tall; she's got the best body. She made a lot of money as a model – a tremendous amount.*
(*Howard Stern Show*, 23/07/2003)

Example (10) can be argued to be within the intentional FE category of our facework loop, because of Ivanka's previous "successful" profession "as a model" (due to models typically being perceived to have "the best body", aesthetically speaking, such that they can make "a lot of money" from their appearances). In a subsequent interview with Stern a year later, Trump went on to state that Ivanka was "very beautiful". The issue in (11), though, is that he also agreed (via "Yeah") with Stern's metonymic assessment of Ivanka as "a piece of ass".

(11) *Trump: My daughter is beautiful, Ivanka.*
Stern: By the way, your daughter […]
Trump: She's beautiful.
Stern: Can I say this? A piece of ass?
Trump: Yeah.
(*Howard Stern Show*, 07/01/2004)

This movement from what we might legitimately term as "fatherly bragging" into a more sexually loaded (and, hence, societally problematic facework) territory is not a one-off. In a conversation at the Miss Teen USA Pageant with then Miss Universe Brook Antoinette Mahealani Lee (on 5/2/1997), Trump allegedly asked her, "Don't you think my daughter's hot? She's hot, right?", thereby assuming a positive response to his loaded polar questions (even though Ivanka was only fifteen years old at the time). In an interview on *The View* (7/03/2006), then-sixty-year-old (married) Trump further stated of his then-twenty-five-year-old daughter that "she does have a very nice figure. I've said if Ivanka weren't my daughter, perhaps I'd be dating her".

Such sexualisation is not limited to his daughter or to adult women, according to research into Trump. In a Christmas special episode of *Entertainment Tonight* (in 1992), cameras captured Trump attempting to engage in banter when he asked a 10-year-old girl, "You're going up the escalator?", before turning to another person present and *joking* how he's "gonna be dating her in 10 years" to the sound of laughter. Laughter is regarded to be "centrally bound up with notions of nonseriousness" in interaction

(Holt 2013: 73). As such, the laughter response arguably gave Trump a means of arguing that this was meant to be – and was – taken by those present with him as "manly banter" only (see "banter" mapped onto the fuzzy boundary between the intentional FE and ambiguous-as-to S's FE intent zones in Figure 6 below), and thus as being more face enhancing than it was face threatening (at least on a surface level). Sinkeviciute (2019: 65) and Cameron (2020) are among a group of researchers to argue, rightly, nonetheless, that it is erroneous to assume that laughter is always a token of humour equal to solidarity, shared agreement, ("manly") bonding, etc. Interestingly, there are more recent video clips of Trump that signal his realisation that such a (sexualised) "interest" in young girls (as he potentially signalled while riding the escalator in 1992) was then and remains now societally unacceptable in most parts of the world (including the US). In the aforementioned 2004 Howard Stern interview, for instance, Trump explained how he had known then-twenty-three-year-old US socialite Paris Hilton "from the time she was 12", adding that her parents were friends of his. He subsequently stated, "the first time I saw her she walked into the room, and I said, 'Who the hell is that?'". Having seemingly recognised the *faux pas*, Trump was quick to disassociate himself from potential accusations of paedophilia by stating: "Well, at 12, I wasn't interested. I've never been into that. They've sort of always stuck around that 25 [years old] category".

Returning now to (8)–(11), while the contexts of the individual utterances lend strong support to an interpretation that Trump seemed to have intended these comments to be understood as FE, the interpretations of the public are (understandably) mixed.[9] Those who found these utterances odd or even problematic seemed to take issue with the aspects of face that Trump's compliments target. These mixed reactions reinforce to us the importance of analysing the context of the discourses themselves (i.e., the activity types, the participants involved, other cues such as demeanour and prosody), the (extrapolated) intentions of the speaker, as well as the reactions of the participants present and, where relevant, other audiences involved too (see the discussion of intended, ancillary and extended audiences in Bourgeois and Bousfield 2026: 35). Furthermore, many of the reactions to the examples above support previous observations that facework that is conducted in unconventional ways is more likely to attract (negative) attention.[10] This explains our reasoning for situating these (aptly labelled) *Trumpian flattery* examples as we do in Figure 5: namely, within the intentional FE zone of the facework loop, but in an

9 *Big Brother* UK contestant Emily Parr experienced comparable, albeit more consequential, backlash for a failed attempt at friendly banter involving the use of a racial slur while being filmed in 2007 (see Archer 2015: 83–84).

10 See discussion of positively and negatively marked behaviours in Locher and Watts (2005) and Culpeper (2008).

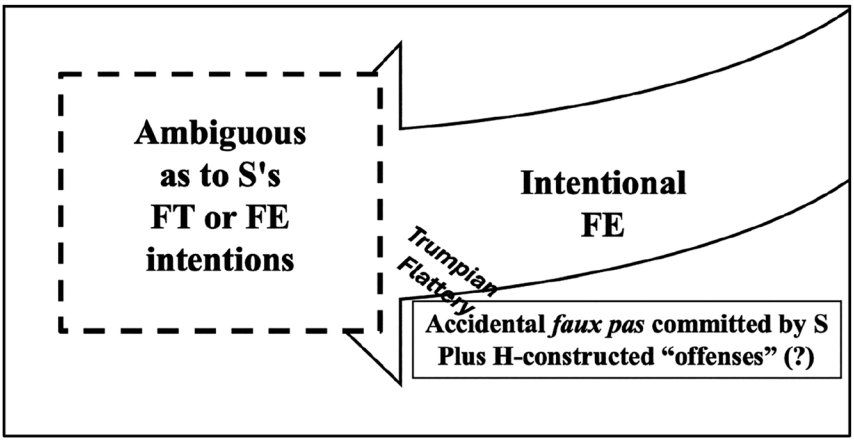

Figure 5: Mapping "Trumpian flattery" and the accidental zone onto the facework loop.

area that potentially overlaps with an accidental zone (which sits adjacent to the loop). This is due to their potential to be found to be inappropriate despite being recognised as (genuine) flattery attempts.[11] Originally inspired by Goffman's (1967: 14) accidental level of face threat, Archer's (2011: 3,227, 2015: 94) accidental zone allows "for some activities to be perceived differently by" the target(s) and/or overhearing members of the public, even though the speaker might argue such an outcome was "unintended and unwitting".

Note that in Archer (2015), the accidental zone was positioned adjacent to the facework scale but on the FT side (see Figure 1). We believe, however, that it sits better as shown in Figure 5 – adjacent to the intentional FE zone – because it allows for a more accurate modelling of cases where a *faux pas* is committed by the speaker, albeit unintentionally, and/or the hearer(s) construct comment(s) made by the speaker as "offensive", despite this threat to face being recognised as unintentional.

7 Situating teasing and back-handed compliments in the facework loop

In this final analysis section, we explore Trumpian communicative behaviours that represent facework that we categorise into our newly proposed ambiguous-as-to S's

11 Culpeper (2008: 32) shows also that "hostile or aggressive behaviours are considered more severe […] and are more likely to receive a strong response, if they are considered intentional" as opposed to accidental.

FT or FE intentions zone, which connects the intentional FT and intentional FE zones that consequently expand Archer's (2015) facework scale into our facework loop. In what follows, we elaborate on how we differentiate *FE banter* from *functionally ambiguous teasing* and additionally elaborate on why we conceptualise back-handed compliments as a prototype of this sort of ambiguous facework. In Section 6, above, we sought to argue that Trump's primary facework intent in examples (8)–(11) was FE, even though the target and/or audience might not have accepted these attempts at flattery as effectively FE. There are instances, though, where Trump engaged in a type of teasing and/or used back-handed compliments where it was unclear as to whether his facework intention was to praise or criticise his target (or both).

Phenomena such as back-handed compliments, as described in 2.1, are what initially prompted us to propose the amendment to Archer's (2015) facework model so that her scale becomes a loop. As such, for us, *back-handed compliments* now sit within the (new) "ambiguous-as-to FT or FE" space of the facework loop (see Figure 6). Figure 6 situates *functionally ambiguous teasing* so that it traverses the "ambiguous-as-to FT or FE intentions" space and "intentional FE" zone, for reasons we describe below. This differentiates functionally ambiguous teasing from *FE banter*, which we conceptualise as more blatantly FE and thus place along the fuzzy border between the intentional FE zone and the ambiguous-as-to-FE-intent space, as shown in Figure 6.

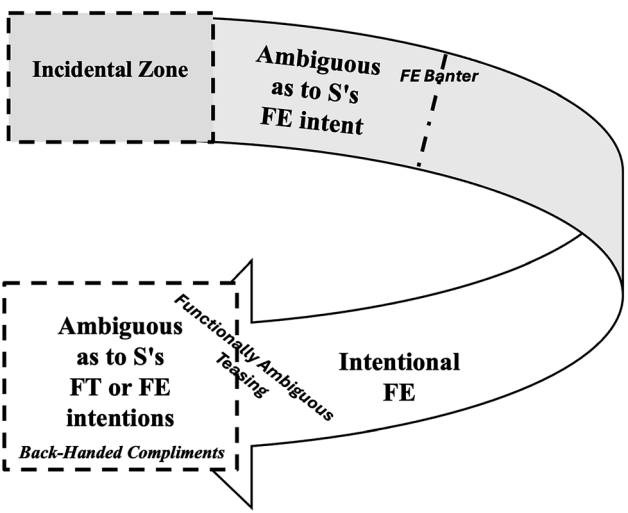

Figure 6: The FE side of the facework loop with "back-handed compliments", "functionally ambiguous teasing" and "face-enhancing banter" mapped onto it.

We have found numerous examples of teasing that, although obviously multifunctional and ambiguous, appear to be tilted in the direction of FE, at least from Trump's perspective. Consider Example (12) from an infamous boardroom scene (taken from the *Celebrity Apprentice* series). The purpose of these boardroom scenes was to give members of a losing team the opportunity to defend themselves to Trump before he determined which of them would be fired. However, they were also a means for Trump to have fun at their expense. In (12), for instance, Trump teases rockstar and former *Poison* frontman Bret Michaels and actress and model Brande Roderick over the meaning of the latter getting "down on her knees".

(12) *Bret:* *Let me say this. Brande came in here. She got down on her knees and said, "I passionately want to do this". I, at this point, am the team chooser, not the team leader yet.*
Trump: *Excuse me. You dropped to your knees?*
Brande: *Yes.*
Bret: *And begged to do this. And I said, I'm looking around the room. And we had even La Toya who sat beside me, thought maybe Brande was right.*
Trump: *Must be a pretty picture, you dropping to your knees. [Brande smiles slightly]*
Bret: *John and Dennis thought I should be. Omarosa said me. [Laughter from co-judge, Piers Morgan]*
(*Celebrity Apprentice*, series 13, ep.1, 03/03/2013)

While Bret had been happy to exchange banter with Trump when he went after them both for allegedly having sexual chemistry minutes earlier in this same scene, he did not participate in it here. Instead, he kept on topic throughout. Whether Bret understood Trump's sexual inuendo and chose not to engage with it or was oblivious to it is not clear. The precise function of Trump's tease is also ambiguous. Even so, it is worth noting that this comment was deemed sexist and offensive by many immediately following its airing (VH1 2013), as well as two years later when Megyn Kelly referenced it during the first 2016 Republican primary debate (see summary in Mercieca 2020: Ch. 16).

Extract (13) from the same episode presents a much more ambiguous comment from Trump. In this excerpt, he is interacting primarily with Omarosa, a controversial and combative contestant in the *Apprentice* series who was then participating in her third and final season of the programme.

(13) *Trump:* *You [speaking to Omarosa] may very much go against Dennis and Claudia later on because I know you well. And you are vicious. Claudia, what's going to happen when she goes against you in two weeks or one week? How are you going to feel about Omarosa when she turns on you like a snake? [Omarosa and others laugh]. Are you going to still like her, Claudia?*
Piers: *Which she will.*
Trump: *Although I have to tell you, over the years, every time she was interviewed, she would defend me. I love her.*
Piers: *It's the one flaw in your character, Mr. Trump.*
Trump: *I know. I have a flaw. She would defend me like no other. Donald Trump is not a racist. Is that right?*
Omarosa: *Absolutely!*
(*Celebrity Apprentice*, series 13, ep.1, 03/03/2013)

This extract begins with what would normally be unambiguous digs against Omarosa: Trump calls her "vicious" and predicts that she will turn on her teammates "like a snake". However, he then switches to confessing his personal "love" for her – albeit because of her steadfast public defence of his character over the previous decade. The audience is thus left with conflicting impressions of Trump's facework intentions. On the one hand, he ruthlessly attacks her integrity. On the other, he says that he "loves her" because she is loyal. Trump's ambiguous facework behaviour here, characterised by us as a prototypical example of a back-handed compliment, can be directly contrasted to the other judge, Piers Morgan, who unequivocally attacks Omarosa's face in the same boardroom scene, and even ironically criticises Trump for his "love" for her. The reactions from the contestants in the boardroom are also mixed, with some of them laughing (including Omarosa) and some of them displaying looks of concern. This makes coming to an unequivocal consensus about Trump's primary facework intentions in this segment murky at best.

A final extract for analysis here from this same episode contains a functionally ambiguous tease that involves Bret Michaels again. However, the facework intentions are noticeably more ambiguous here and thus more debatable than we saw in (12) above. Extract (14), which immediately follows extract (13), begins with Bret raising his hand and overlapping Trump to state:

(14) *Bret:* *I can also say I'm not a racist as I picked this team.*
Trump: *We don't give a shit about you not being racist. [laughter but also interjections of sympathy ("aw")] Nobody cares. [Bret looks down] Nobody cares. [continued laughter]*
(*Celebrity Apprentice,* series 13, ep.1, 03/03/2013)

Bret's initial paralinguistic as well as linguistic behaviour point to him wanting to engage with what is happening in (13) above. However, Trump engaged in an immediate put down of Bret ("We don't give a shit about you not being racist"). Whether this was meant to be FE, in the form of mock impoliteness, on Trump's part is debatable, as Trump gave conflicting indications of his facework intentions. For instance, while Trump smiled while delivering the put down, he also used a dismissive arm gesture. His repetition of "nobody cares", moreover, secured both laughter and sympathetic *aw* interjections from those within the boardroom – indicating differing interpretations of this exchange from the participants in the room. What is less contestable is that Bret personally found Trump's turn offensive, having told Brande so in a private moment minutes later in the same episode (for a more detailed discussion of how Goffmanian "backstage" comments tend to demonstrate more genuine feelings than "frontstage" reactions in reality TV programmes, see Sinkeviciute 2019: Ch. 6).

Interestingly, Trump's official response to the controversies such as those cited above – and numerous others like them – was to rationalise them as failed banter or simple *faux pas* (BBC News 2015; Mercieca 2020: Ch. 16). However, the fact that these behaviours span decades suggests a consistent and strategic pattern rather than isolated lapses in judgment. Attempts to minimise such behaviours (as failed banter or *faux pas* taken out of context), despite extensive evidence of a decades-long pattern of problematic utterances, echoes research in criminal narratology that was highlighted in Section 1. Poppi and Verde (2021: 933) show how offenders can construct narratives in ways that attempt to rationalise their infractions, by problematising and, in some cases, even "escap[ing] [their own versus others'] agency, responsibility and guilt". In the cases of Trump breaching politeness norms and expectations via non-conventional and ambiguous means, a similar dynamic unfolds when he is consequently criticised for these infractions. Namely, he simultaneously presents himself as humorous, bold and truthful, while also positioning himself as censored, persecuted and misunderstood in an attempt to influence or potentially even manipulate his targeted audience into adopting a "faulty mental state", which he, himself, has "moulded" according to his own "egoistic purpose(s)" (Archer in press).

8 Conclusions

While Sections 4–6 have analysed many examples that can be satisfactorily accommodated within Archer's (2015) original facework scale already, the three examples highlighted in Section 7 especially underscore the benefit of including a new "ambiguous-as-to S's FT or FE intentions" zone to accommodate cases where the facework falls between the FE and FT zones (e.g., back-handed compliments) or

traverses our new ambiguous area and the intentional FE zone (e.g., functionally ambiguous teasing). This is crucial in Trump's case given that – despite being notorious for his brash, offensive and controversial behaviours – Trump regularly affords himself some plausible deniability by engaging in ambiguous strategic facework (and has done so for some time). Our facework loop is the only model to our knowledge that can successfully accommodate these varied (overt and strategically ambiguous) communication strategies.

One thing to come out of our analysis is that an FT or FE intention can be so murky that the participants as well as audiences are unable to come to a consensus regarding the intended meaning of the comment in question. Psychological research identifies similar difficulties encountered by people by acknowledging the social bonding potential of teasing and banter while also recognising that it can quickly cross the boundaries of acceptability, particularly in public or when masking harmful intent (Buglass et al. 2021: 297). In fact, Archer (in press) examines how varying audiences interpret Trump's intended meanings differently by analysing fifteen excerpts from six televised speeches given across a ten-year period. She shows how he frequently used "ambiguous/vague language, implicatures, presuppositions, self/other-presentation devices, hyperbole, repetition, etc." to mould "his audiences' perceptual lenses (aka their 'reality paradigms')" of political opponents, organisations, policies and even "the (il)legality of the 2020 US elections" (Archer in press).

In future work, we intend to combine both approaches – namely, the facework loop and the reality paradigm concept – to explore differing responses to a fuller range of ambiguous facework strategies as used by (populist) politicians such as Trump to investigate the extent to which they seek to manipulate the worldview of their fanbases especially. We will also be engaging in further research, drawing upon the facework loop, to delineate and critique the varying facework strategies used by other global political figures: paying special attention to those who have been adopting (especially humorous/potentially offensive) personas, as a means of assessing who assigns whom "agency", and thus ultimate "moral" (versus personal) "responsibility" for the state of a particular policy, country, etc. (cf. Poppi and Verde 2021: 933).[12] As well as testing the durability of the facework loop, this future work will assist us (and others) in empirically discerning where to place the facework strategies of contemporary politicians and other public figures, particularly when used to breach controversial topics and socially and legally sanctioned societal taboos. Given the volatility of the global political landscape, which has only gotten more contentious in Trump's second term, such analyses are arguably more relevant

12 This work will thus more closely align facework and identity, via self- and/or other-presentation (Goffman 1959).

than ever. Even so, the utility of this facework loop (like Archer's earlier facework scale) should not be seen as being limited to political contexts only.

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