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Press freedom vs political power: a critical analysis of linguistic impoliteness in presidential press conferences

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Abstract

Linguistic impoliteness has become an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary public discourse, particularly in interactions between political leaders and journalists. However, impolite language in public discourse has received limited attention from a discourse-analytic perspective focused on the interactions between presidents and the press. In this paper, we analyse the use of linguistic impoliteness in presidential press conferences and its potential impact on press freedom. Specifically, we explore the types of impoliteness employed, their potential discursive functions, and their implications for freedom of the press. The research corpus consists of transcribed excerpts from four presidential press conferences held in March and April 2020, during Trump's first presidential term, focusing on instances where Trump used impoliteness in communication with journalists. In the study, we adopt a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, drawing on Culpeper's (2011a) and Bousfield's (2008) theoretical frameworks to analyse the forms and functions of impoliteness, alongside Fairclough's (1989; 1995) critical discourse approach to account for power relations within the selected discourse. The findings indicate that Trump's use of impoliteness served multiple functions, such as evading and discouraging challenging questions, and undermining press credibility to mitigate criticism. Furthermore, the findings suggest that impoliteness can function as a mechanism for asserting authority, controlling discourse, and perpetuating power asymmetries between speakers. We therefore conclude that such use of linguistic impoliteness in presidential-press discourse may have a limiting effect on press freedom and is enabled by the power differential between presidents and journalists. (примљено: 17. јула 2025; прихваћено: 15. марта 2026)

1. Introduction

Press freedom and political power are prominent elements of a democratic society but the relationship between the two is complex and often contentious. Owing to press freedom, journalists act as public watchdogs on the holders of power, bringing the (mis)use of political power under closer scrutiny and exposing it to the public eye (Clark/Grech, 2017). Such practice, however, often meets resistance on the part of presidents/politicians, who can push back against unfavourable scrutiny from journalists by using impoliteness. This can include derogatory terms, insults, and personal attacks aimed at journalists and news organisations, with studies indicating that such use of language has risen over the last decades (Clark/Grech, 2017; Cervone et al., 2021; Nilsson/Örnebring, 2016).

The U.S. President Donald Trump is notoriously associated with this practice. Videos where Trump publicly confronts and insults journalists at presidential press conferences circulate through social media platforms with millions of views, creating what Kellner (2016) calls a “media spectacle”. Trump is also known to have prolifically used his Twitter (now X) account to target the media. A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (Downie/Sugars, 2020: 12) recorded over a thousand tweets from Trump targeting the media, with more than 400 mentioning over 100 individual journalists from 30 different news outlets such as CNN, NBC, etc. Among other things, Trump used derogatory terms such as “fake”, “nasty”, “stupid”, “failing”, “dishonest”, and “disgraced” to describe some of the American media networks (Downie/Sugars, 2020: 12).

Wodak and colleagues (2021: 370) remark that despite the fact Trump has expressed extremely controversial opinions and taken decisions that violated traditional norms, his supporters have remained loyal. Unsurprisingly, in the comment sections of such videos/tweets, there is evident support for Trump’s behaviour, which fits in the context of Wodak’s (2021: 6) concept of “shameless normalisation”¹. Wodak and colleagues (2021: 371) point out that the normalisation of shameless behaviour is achieved via strategic scandalisation and provocation, with politicians instrumentalising the fact that such behaviour is positively evaluated by their firm supporters. In fact, Kellner (2017: 76) suggests that Trump emerged as a successful “creator and manipulator of the spectacle”, who recognised the significance of media attention to succeed in media-centric hypercapitalism, and used it to promote and empower his own presidential campaign and presidency.

Hence, the questions that arise are the following: Why do presidents use impoliteness strategies, and what political functions can these strategies serve? How can impoliteness towards the press affect the freedom of the press?

1 Wodak (2021a: 6) defines her concept of “shameless normalization” as follows: “The boundaries of the ‘sayable’ are being shifted, and ‘anything goes’. Traditional norms and rules of political culture, of negotiation and deliberation are transcended by continuous provocations, disseminated via the media, supported by mainstream conservatives and thus normalised. I propose labelling this new characteristic of political culture as ‘shameless normalisation’”. Wodak (2021b: 370) later notes that her definition (2021a: 6) principally refers to impolite behaviour.

In order to answer these questions, we draw on elements of *impoliteness theory* (Culpeper, 2011a; Bousfield, 2008), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989; 1995) in analysing Trump's use of impoliteness in presidential press conferences. Regarding the paper's structure, after introducing the concepts of press freedom, political power, and impoliteness, we lay out the methodology of our research, the critical analysis and discussion of excerpts from selected presidential press conferences, and lastly the limitations and main conclusions of our research.

2. Presidential press conferences: a clash of interest between press freedom and political power?

In the context of the United States, Kumar (2007: 253–255) remarks that presidential press conferences have come to be considered as a foundational element of a democratic government, and are one of the best examples of presidential communications in an unscripted form. A presidential press conference can be formal, held in prime time in the East Room, or informal, as in the cases of afternoon gatherings in the press briefing room; it may also be a solo event or joint conference with foreign dignitaries, held inside or outside the United States, typically beginning with a president making a brief statement before receiving questions from journalists (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2012: 473–474). This allows journalists to question the explanations a president gives for their actions, and further seek transparency of government affairs. This is in line with the concept of the freedom of the press, which refers to the journalists' autonomy from political interference (Kenny, 2020) to safely probe and criticise political and economic elites (van Belle, 2000), without censorship, licensing or other controls by government, and thus have “an unhindered right to publish and disseminate news and opinions” (McQuail, 2010: 156). Press freedom is also enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution (1791), which states that “Congress shall make no law [...] abridging the freedom of speech or of the press” (U.S. Const. amend. I), as well as in international charters, like the United Nations Charter (Article 19) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 10). Therefore, the freedom of the press enables journalists to raise awareness on issues that affect the public and hold those in positions of power accountable (Clark/Grech, 2017: 15).

On the other hand, apart from their obligation to inform the public about their governance, Kumar (2007: 255) suggested that presidents have come to see that they can also use press conferences as an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to defend their policies and win friends and allies among the general public. In order to do so, they often create “media spectacles” where they combine politics and performance to garner popular support (Kellner, 2016). Part of their “performance” can be the exercise of power over the less powerful, which can include impoliteness towards the press. Accordingly, an analysis of impoliteness requires an analysis of speakers' power too because impoliteness can be a way of asserting and accruing one's political power (Bacić, 2023: 235).

Chilton (2004: 3) views politics as the struggle for power between two parties: “those who seek to assert and maintain power and those who seek to resist it”.

For van Dijk (1997: 11), an analysis of political discourse “deals especially with the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, including various forms of resistance or counter-power against such forms of discursive dominance”. With regards to power, Fairclough (1995: 1–2) views it in terms of “asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced [...] in particular sociocultural contexts”, while Wodak (1996: 65) sees it in terms of discursive control of “who has access to the various types of discourse, who can and cannot talk to whom, in which situations, and about what circumstances”. In these terms, both presidents and journalists hold a certain degree of power, but while the former seek to assert and maintain it, the latter aim to make it transparent and hold it accountable.

However, in circumstances when there is a power imbalance between speakers – such as in presidential press conferences – the vulnerability of face becomes unequal, with more sensitivity on the part of the less powerful speakers (Culpeper, 1996: 354; cf. Fairclough, 1995). In these circumstances, the underlying clash of interests inherent in the power struggle becomes more apparent, as well as the restrictions of one’s verbal possibilities (García-Pastor, 2008: 103). Thus, a more powerful participant is more likely to be impolite, because they can “(a) reduce the ability of the less powerful participant to retaliate with impoliteness, and (b) threaten more severe retaliation should the less powerful participant be impolite” (Culpeper, 1996: 354). This fact creates a clear power imbalance in presidential press conferences. Seemingly, presidents are able to verbally attack journalists with impunity, using power to discredit and dismiss unfavourable coverage, while journalists remain vulnerable to such face attacks. Thus, the contentious nature of the relationship between press freedom and political power appears to stem from a fundamental clash of interests: on the one hand, presidents strive to maintain their position in power and popularity among the public, and on the other hand, journalists are tasked with scrutinising their governance. This often adversarial and win–lose nature gives presidential press conferences a zero-sum game character, where one’s gain comes at the other’s loss (García-Pastor, 2008).

3. Impoliteness strategies

Linguistic impoliteness is a context-sensitive phenomenon, which makes defining it a challenging task. Generally, impoliteness is described as communicative behaviour that threatens a speaker’s face (Locher/Bousfield, 2008)². Culpeper (2011a: 21) sees it as types of behaviour that “cause or are presumed to cause offence”, and points out that the central part of any definition of impoliteness is “the emotional

2 In the literature of pragmatics, linguistic impoliteness is viewed in terms of communicative strategies that attack a speaker’s face, rather than mere rudeness (cf. Culpeper, 1996; Locher/Bousfield, 2008; Brown/Levinson, 1987). Goffman (1967: 5) defines the notion of face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”. Brown and Levinson (1987) further divide the notion into positive and negative face. By positive face, they indicate the speaker’s desire to have an appreciated and approved self-image; by negative face, they indicate the speaker’s desire to be free of any imposition, distraction, or disturbance.

consequence for the target". With regard to the nature of impolite behaviour, the concept of intentionality plays an important role and adds complexity to it since it is rather difficult to determine. Culpeper (2011a: 21) thus takes a broader view on intentionality, and assumes that "various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including, for example, whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not". Likewise, Kádár (2017) acknowledges the role of intentionality in impoliteness, and notes that in vis-à-vis interactions it can operate as an "evaluative phenomenon", based on how interlocutors perceive and interpret it. Bousfield's (2008: 72) definition, however, is more succinct, and is formulated as the issuing of "intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts". In our case, Bousfield's (2008) and Culpeper's (2011a) definitions are applicable because presidential press conferences present official speech events where certain expected norms of behaviour can be easily violated through impoliteness, and where participants' face vulnerability is increased. Speaking of face-attack strategies, Culpeper (2011a: 126) identifies types of utterances that are typically perceived as impolite.

- i. Insults:
 - a. Personalised negative vocatives: Directly calling someone insulting names such as "moron", "loser", etc.;
 - b. Personalised negative assertions: Making derogatory statements about someone, such as "You are stupid", "You can't do anything right", etc.;
 - c. Personalised negative references: Insulting someone on the basis of body or appearance, such as "Your stinking mouth", "Your little arse", etc.;
 - d. Personalised third-person negative references: Talking negatively about someone in their presence, such as referring to them as "The daft bimbo", etc.;
- ii. Pointed criticisms/complaints: Strongly criticising something, such as saying "That was absolutely terrible", "That is crap", etc.;
- iii. Unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions: Asking questions with an impolite implicature: "Which lie are you telling me?", "Why do you make my life impossible?", etc.;
- iv. Condescension: Speaking with an attitude that belittles or patronises others, often implying a sense of superiority: "That's babyish", etc.;
- v. Message enforcers: Asserting authority as in "Do you understand me?", "Listen here", etc.;
- vi. Dismissals: Showing lack of interest as in "Go away", "Get lost", etc.;
- vii. Silencers: Requesting someone to stop talking, such as "Shut up", etc.;
- viii. Threats: Threatening violence, such as saying "I'm gonna smash your face if you don't X", "I'll beat the shit out of you", etc.;
- ix. Negative expressives: Cursing or wishing harm upon someone, such as saying "Go to hell", "Fuck you", etc.

(adapted from Culpeper, 2011a: 135–136)

Culpeper adds that the list of impoliteness strategies is incomplete and mostly restricted to grammar and lexis, adding that paralinguistic behaviour such as rolling one's eyes, or turning one's back on someone, may be considered as conventionalised non-verbal visual impoliteness behaviour. Likewise, there are instances where impoliteness is signalled prosodically, as in cases where a speaker deprives another of their freedom to speak by interrupting them or denying them a turn (Culpeper et al., 2003: 1569; cf. Culpeper, 2011b).

In terms of the dynamics of impoliteness, such as in a confrontational communicative event, Bousfield (2008) suggests there are distinct stages through which an impolite exchange unfolds, as well as response options that speakers typically take. Accordingly, an impolite exchange typically begins with an initial face-threatening act (FTA), which acts as a trigger point that sets off a sequence of impolite interactions. Once the FTA occurs, the interlocutor is faced with a decision to either Respond to the act of impoliteness or Withdraw from the exchange. Choosing to respond keeps the exchange ongoing, while withdrawing may result in a possible unresolved standoff. If the interlocutor opts to Respond, they have two possible courses of action: to Deny the opposition or to Accept it. Should the speaker decide to Deny the opposition, they can take one of two approaches: to either Counter or Compromise with the FTA. If a speaker chooses to Counter, the response can then lead to either a Defensive or Offensive continuation of the interaction, potentially escalating until a standoff is reached. Accordingly, the dynamics of impolite exchanges can be seen as the unfolding of a series of strategic decisions and responses.

4. Methodology

To analyse the use of impoliteness in the selected presidential press conferences, we employed a second-order approach to impoliteness (Watts, 2003), as the speaker's use of face-aggravation strategies. We adopted Bousfield's (2008: 72) view of impoliteness as the issuing of "gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts" and Culpeper's (2011a) classification of face-attack impoliteness strategies. Additionally, we drew on elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989; 1995) for an integrative top-down approach. CDA involves the analysis of the text (spoken and/or written), situational context, and social factors, and attempts to uncover the underlying power dynamics and social inequalities in these elements (Fairclough, 2005; van Dijk, 2015; Paltridge, 2021). Particularly, we drew on Fairclough's (1989; 1995) three-dimensional approach, where discourse is viewed as language text, discourse practice, and socio-cultural practice at once. Overall, we focused on identifying (a) types of utterances that fall into Culpeper's (2011a) taxonomy of conventionalised impoliteness formulae, (b) the contextual cues that allow their interpretation as such, and (c) the potential communicative functions and implications these instances of impoliteness have within the broader socio-linguistic context. In addition, we used a CDA approach for considering the underlying features of the use of impoliteness and factors that enable it in relation to the concept of political power.

4.1. Corpus

With regard to the corpus data, we selected the press conferences held by Donald Trump, the 45th and 47th President of the U.S.A., because of his high-profile political status and well-documented use of “confrontational” and “abrasive” language in presidential–press discourse (Carlson et al., 2020; Downie/Sugars, 2020; Abudayeh/Dubbati, 2010; Wijanarko/Sembodo, 2018). Presidential press conferences were chosen because they serve as an official channel for public communication of government affairs, governed by established norms and expectations, where, as a result, instances of impoliteness present clear violations of these norms (Wodak et al., 2021). After reviewing a set of press conferences, we isolated those in which linguistically salient instances of impoliteness appear. We took a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, where the selection of linguistically informative examples is given priority, following Fairclough’s (2003: 6) view that qualitative analysis “is rather ‘labour-intensive’ and can be productively applied to samples of research material rather than large bodies of text”. We thus focused on four of Trump’s press conferences held in March and April 2020, during his first term as POTUS. It is noteworthy that this period was particularly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in terms of presidential–press discourse, may have resulted in intensified pressure on the Trump administration regarding the handling of the pandemic in the country. The analysed instances of impoliteness are excerpted from videos of Trump’s press conferences published by mainstream U.S. news outlets, such as NBC News, CNN, and CBS News, and by Breitbart News³. Finally, the excerpted data were transcribed through manual orthographic transcription, based on close listening to the source video recordings.

5. Critical analysis

As Wodak (1996: 65) noted, “the more powerful the people, the larger their verbal possibilities in discourse become”. Indeed, political power both enables and expands verbal possibilities encompassing various impoliteness strategies. In particular, in a communicative event where one speaker has authority over another, impolite behaviour can have negative effects on the recipient, such as the feeling of shame, loss of face, intimidation, etc. In our case, given that Trump, as president, has strong authority, the use of impoliteness becomes more salient and can take different functions to his benefit and to the detriment of journalists. Based on our data, there is a noticeable use of impoliteness towards journalists in Trump’s presidential press conferences, which we have arranged into two broad impoliteness strategies, proposing to classify them as *question evasion and discouragement of*

3 According to multiple reports, including NBC News (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/white-house-purges-transcripts-trump-remarks-website-rcna208059>), the White House removed official transcripts of Trump’s press conferences from its website and replaced them with selected videos. Thus, the analysed data were excerpted and transcribed from YouTube videos of press conference segments published by NBC News (duration: 2:47), CNN (9:00), CBS News (2:38), and Breitbart News (4:08), as, to our knowledge, full official transcripts could not be located. The transcribed excerpts are used for the purposes of linguistic analysis and cannot be read as comprehensive representations of the full press conferences.

further inquiry, and *undermining credibility to mitigate criticism* – the former often enabling the latter.

5.1. Question evasion and discouragement of further inquiry

Presidential authority can be used to reframe interactions with the press in ways that deflect scrutiny from the question, sometimes by challenging or insulting the journalist rather than addressing the issue raised. This practice, however, may discourage journalists from further inquiry, either on the basis of losing face, intimidation, or discomfort in general. In the following examples, the use of impolite language seems to lead to the mentioned results:

1. Peter Alexander, NBC News: [...] What do you say to Americans, who are scared, though? I guess, nearly 200 dead, 14,000 who are sick, millions, as you witness, who are scared right now. What do you say to Americans who are watching you right now, who are scared?

Trump: I say that you're a terrible reporter – that's what I say. I think it's a very nasty question, and I think it's a very bad signal that you're putting out to the American people. The American people are looking for answers and they're looking for hope – and you're doing sensationalism and the same with NBC and Concast, I don't call, I don't call it Comcast, I call it Concast. Let me just, let me just tell you something – that's really bad reporting, and you ought to get back to reporting instead of sensationalism. Let's see if it works – it might, and it might not. I happen to feel good about it, but who knows, I've been right a lot, let's see what happens. You should be ashamed of yourself. (NBC News, 2020)

In this instance, Alexander asks Trump a question regarding the public's concern about the high number of coronavirus disease casualties and the widespread fear among the American people. Trump avoids giving a relevant answer to the question, clearly intentionally and in a sort of “protest” against the improper nature of the question as he sees it. In his explanation, Trump does not provide evidence to the perceived nature of the question but rather proceeds with *personal negative assertions* (Culpeper, 2011a) and *ad hominem* attacks against Alexander, calling him “a terrible reporter”. This constitutes a clear example of Culpeper's (1996: 356) *bald on record impoliteness* superstrategy, defined as an “FTA performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way”. As García-Pastor (2008) remarks, face-aggravating strategies take different forms and operate in specific ways in communicative events, often with more than just one strategy employed. Indeed, Trump continues with an exacerbation of offensiveness, whereby he calls Alexander's question “very nasty” and characterises it as “a bad signal”, and “bad reporting”. These derogatory terms seem to serve as an attempt to evade the substance of the question, something in which Trump eventually succeeds. In addition, the use of such disparaging language evidently discouraged Alexander from further inquiry as he did not follow up on Trump's criticism and withdrew from the exchange. This is in line with

the position of Downie and Sugars (2020: 11–13), who suggest that impoliteness can function as a form of intimidation and discourage a journalist at hand from continuing to ask challenging questions, as well as a deterrent for other journalists from asking similar questions in the future. As a result, journalists may be less likely to pursue challenging lines of inquiry if they fear or expect to be attacked and insulted. This can have a significant limiting effect on the freedom of the press, and make journalists more vulnerable and at higher risk of self-censorship. Taking into consideration Wodak and colleagues' (2021: 376) assumption that politicians may be actually “playing to an audience” in such sorts of exchanges, trying to achieve strategic goals, such as to gain more supporters (Kienpointer, 1997: 272), it can be assumed that Trump tries to make a contrast between Alexander and himself to create an image of authority and credibility. This echoes an observation made by Jarowski and Galasiński (2000), who suggest that it is through negative other-depiction and positive self-depiction conversation strategies that politicians bid for power.

2. Yamiche Alcindor, NBC News: You've said repeatedly that you think that some of the equipment that governors are requesting they don't actually need, you said...

Trump: I didn't say that, I didn't say that, come on, come on... You know, why don't you people act, let me say this, why don't you act in a little more positive? It's always trying to get ya – get ya, get ya – and you know what, that's why nobody trusts the media anymore...

Alcindor: My question to you is how's that going to impact...

Trump: Excuse me, you didn't hear me. That's why you used to work for The Times, and now you work for somebody else. Look, let me tell you something: be nice – don't be threatening, don't be threatening, be nice – go ahead. [...]
(CNN, 2020)

Initially, when confronted with a question about his previous statements suggesting that some governors did not need all of the equipment they requested to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump interrupts Alcindor and denies making those statements. He then redirects the conversation topic towards Alcindor's alleged inaccuracy and steers the interaction onto a different discursive path. In the process, Trump uses an *unpalatable question* with a negative implicature, and *pointed criticism* (Culpeper, 2011a) for Alcindor allegedly not being more “positive” in her approach, which can constitute a face-threatening act to her positive and negative face. In particular, when Alcindor tries to finish her question, Trump takes over her turn using a *message enforcer* (Culpeper, 2011a), “you didn't hear me”, which allows him to demonstrate authority and take control over the discourse. Furthermore, Trump reinforces his negative representation of Alcindor through *unpalatable presupposition* and *condescension* (Culpeper, 2011a), saying “that's why you used to work for The Times, and now you work for somebody else”, which

implies that she lost her previous job due to the incompetence Trump suggests she exhibits in this exchange. As a matter of fact, the use of *personalised negative assertions* and *pointed criticism* appears to be a recurring element of Trump's impoliteness strategies in encounters with journalists – in yet another instance with a black female journalist, when asked if he wanted his Attorney General to “rein in” Special Counsel Robert Muller, Trump avoided answering the question and instead criticised Abby Phillip of CNN for what he called “a stupid question” (CNN, 2018).

5.2. Undermining credibility to mitigate criticism

Undermining press credibility and eliciting its public distrust can serve as a strategy for presidents to deflect or mitigate criticism. In fact, long before Trump, President Richard Nixon claimed that “getting a fair hearing from the public [...] required discrediting the media” (Greenberg, 2016: 398), and even frequently raged at journalists, calling them “clowns” and “sons of bitches” (Downie/Sugars, 2020: 9). For instance, Chris Wallace of Fox News remarked at a press freedom event that Trump “has done everything he can to undercut and delegitimise the media” and that “his purpose is clear: to raise doubts, when [journalists] report critically about him and his administration” (Downie/Sugars, 2020: 9). In the following exchanges with journalists, Trump used different formulations to criticise and delegitimise journalists.

3. Paula Reid, CBS News: [...] But what did you do with the time that you bought? The argument is that you bought yourself some time, you didn't use it to prepare hospitals, you didn't use it to ramp up testing, are you...

Trump: You're so, you are so, you're so disgraceful – it's so disgraceful the way you said that... Let, let me just, listen, I just went over it. [...]

Reid: [...] What did your administration do in February with the time that your travel ban bought you?

Trump: A lot, a lot, and in fact we'll give you a list what we did, in fact part of it was up there, we did a lot. Look, look, you know you're a fake, you know that your whole network, the way you cover, is fake, and most of you, and not all of you, but the people are wise to you, that's why you have a lower, a lower approval rating than you've ever had before, times probably three. [...] (CBS News, 2020)

After Reid questions Trump about the actions he took to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease and whether the time he had was used effectively, Trump responds with harsh criticism and tries to undermine her credibility as a journalist. Trump potentially resorts to this way of answering Reid's question in order to mitigate criticism of his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, which is the subject matter of Reid's question. Trump starts with *personalised negative assertions* calling Reid and her reporting “disgraceful” and “fake”. This way,

Trump targets Reid's institutional role as a journalist, as well as her professional value and competence. Indeed, Trump's prolific use of the phrase "fake news" has caught much analytical attention and has been described as a rhetorical device to undermine the credibility of unfavourable news coverage (Davis/Sinnreich, 2018). In his taxonomy of Trump's tweets, Lakoff views this label as an attempt to "deflect" (Gladstone, 2017), while Carlson and colleagues (2020) see it as a tool for delegitimising journalistic accounts. Moreover, Davis and Sinnreich (2018: 163) conclude that the use of "that misnomer was not a product of differing news values nor of questions about the veracity of reporting, but rather [...] a discursive weapon in Trump's reputation-management arsenal". After Trump introduces the idea of bias and the lack of credibility in both Reid and her media network, he reinforces it by claiming that CBS News has a "lower approval rating than [...] ever before, times probably three". On the other hand, Trump praises his own actions, which he portrays as unprecedented, effective, successful, and indicative of his competence and leadership. This creates a juxtaposition between him and Reid's criticism. In other words, Trump uses the strategy of self-legitimation, in which a contestant gives credit to themselves, validates their points (John et al., 2022: 498), and appeals to public approval by relying on their ethos.

4. Jeremy Diamond, CNN: Mr President, more than 22 million Americans are currently unemployed as a result of this. Today we hit the grim milestone of more than 40,000 Americans now having died from the coronavirus. Can you explain then, why you come out here and you are reading clips and showing clips of praise for you and for your administration? Is this really the time for self-congratulations?

Trump: Well, I will tell you this, what I'm doing is I'm standing up for the men and women that have done such an incredible job, not for me, for the men and women, admirals, vice president, if I might, but all of the men and women, thousands, tens of thousands of 'em that built hospitals in New York and New Jersey, and all over this country, in record time, that throw up a thousand beds in four days – I'm sticking up for those people, those people have been incredible, I'm also sticking up for doctors, and nurses, and military doctors, and nurses.

Diamond: What you played and what you read earlier was praising you and your administration.

Trump: All I played today was Governor Cuomo, saying very positive things about the job the federal government has done. And those people have been just absolutely excoriated by some of the fake news like you, you're CNN – you're fake news – and let me just tell you, they were excoriated by people like you, that don't know any better because you don't have the brains you were born with. You should be praising the people that have done a good job, not doing what you do, even that question. [...]

[...] Look, look, you're never gonna treat me fairly, many of you, and I understand that, I don't even know, I got here with the worst, most unfair press treatment

they say in the history of the United States for a president, they did say Abraham Lincoln had a very bad treatment too. [...] (Breitbart News, 2020)

In this excerpt, Trump criticised Diamond after he asked him for the reasons why he played clips praising the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to Diamond's question, Trump began his turn with a discourse particle "well", which, in turn-initial positions of a response to a wh-question, is seen as a signal to a non-straightforward response (Schegloff/Lerner, 2009; Weatherall, 2011: 3), and stated that he did not praise himself but rather the administrative and medical workers. After Diamond stressed his initial question, Trump reiterated his answer and proceeded to discredit Diamond's and his network's credibility by labelling them as "fake news", and accusing them of "excoriating" those who praise his administration's response, adding that they "don't know any better" because they "don't have the brains [they] were born with", which constitutes *bald on record impoliteness*, including *pointed criticism*, and *personalised negative assertions* (Culpeper, 2011a). Along with attempting to undermine press credibility, Trump appears to employ a strategy of self-victimisation, whereby he portrays himself as a victim of unfair treatment by the media, and claims that he received what he calls "the worst, most unfair press treatment, they say, in the history of the United States for a president". Self-victimisation can be used to garner public empathy and support, but also to downplay criticism. This is in line with Berrocal's (2017) view that in political discourse victim playing may function as a pro-active verbal strategy in public verbal disputes, where "depicting oneself as someone's victim [...] one can achieve a rhetorical effect: charging the rival with his morally questionable behaviour and at the same time eliciting sympathy for one's own case" (Schwitalla, 1996: 337, translated and cited by Berrocal, 2017: 85).

6. Discussion

While there is a general assumption that a polite communicative event subsumes a mutual recognition of interlocutors as equals, impolite behaviour rejects that recognition (Culpeper, 1996). Indeed, it is evident from the analysis that the journalists did not counter-respond to Trump's impoliteness, but instead tried to return to the substance of their questions. This communication dynamic illustrates the power differential between presidents and journalists, where default interaction mechanisms enable the more powerful speaker, such as a president, to achieve the upper hand, whereas the less powerful, in this case, journalists, have reduced ability to respond and risk more severe retaliation should they engage in offensive/defensive counter-respond options (Culpeper, 1996; Locher/Bousfield, 2008). Cervone and colleagues (2021: 84, 40) argue that the asymmetrical use of impolite language reinforces social hierarchies and maintains power differential between dominant and subordinate groups, warning that victims of impolite exchanges suffer the toll of verbal derogation in terms of both mental and physical health. Throughout the analysed data of Trump's exchanges with journalists, we identified instances of

impoliteness such as *personalised negative assertions*, *pointed criticism*, *unpalatable questions*, *unpalatable presuppositions*, *condescension*, and *message enforcers*. These instances constitute *bald on record impoliteness* strategies, with *personalised negative assertions* and *pointed criticism* being the most prevalent. Furthermore, our analysis suggested that Trump used impoliteness to a) deflect from and evade answering challenging questions, b) discourage journalists from further inquiry, c) undermine the credibility of journalists and the news organisations they are affiliated with, d) mitigate criticism, e) take control of the course of the interaction, and f) present himself in a positive light while presenting the journalists in a negative one. We stress that such use of impoliteness is enabled by political power, and may be used to control discourse, suppress criticism, manipulate information, and deter resistance to hegemony in contexts where interlocutors are not equally powerful. In the context of press freedom, it can have a negative impact, for if holders of power are able to restrict scrutiny and intimidate journalists, they can subsequently limit the freedom of the press. As a reflection of a broader impact on society, exposure to derogatory language can lead the audience, especially younger individuals, to become desensitised to it. As a result, they may view non-normative behaviours, including towards the press, as morally and socially acceptable, and even as actions worth emulating (Soral et al., 2018; Winiewski et al., 2017), particularly when it comes from the highest-ranked official, such as the president of a country. This is in line with the report of Downie and Sugars (2020: 8–13), who presented compelling data indicating that journalists increasingly feel unsafe covering Trump in the presence of his supporters, which may be factored by Trump's use of impoliteness. The report also highlights that, following Trump's press targeting, journalists were repeatedly booed, threatened, and insulted by some of his supporters, and warn that Trump's media targeting may have also encouraged autocratic leaders to target the press in their own countries.

In terms of research limitations, we point to the limited dataset of analysed presidential press conferences, as well as the limitations critical analysis has on its own. Given that our analysis focuses on a single president, the results cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, the findings reveal alarming instances of (mis)use of power with a potential for the erosion of press freedom that warrant consideration and further analytic attention.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on Culpeper's (2011a), Bousfield's (2008), and Fairclough's (1989; 1995) analytical frameworks, our analysis identified the types of impoliteness strategies Trump used in the selected presidential press conferences, and indicated that these strategies served multiple purposes, such as evading and discouraging challenging questions, and undermining press credibility to mitigate criticism. We also argued that Trump's impolite exchanges with journalists in presidential press conferences demonstrate how presidents can use impoliteness to assert authority, control discourse, and subsequently reinforce power differential between themselves and

the press. As an implication for presidential–press discourse, we argued that using linguistic impoliteness as a means of maintaining power comes at the cost of exerting a negative impact on the freedom of the press, such as its limitation, as well as the stress on journalists. We therefore propose that journalism should be better protected through mechanisms that provide journalists with an appropriate form of recourse against impoliteness. We suggest this because directing impoliteness at journalists for the questions they ask can foster a culture of self-censorship and non-probing inquiry, as journalists may avoid more challenging lines of questioning in order to spare themselves potential criticism and impolite language, which illustrates how impoliteness can diminish press freedom over time.

For future research, we suggest a comparative analysis of the intensity of Trump's adversarial relationship with the press across his first and current second terms. The analysis could also account for variables such as Trump's communication style towards journalists affiliated with specific news outlets (e.g. CNN vs Fox News), the nature of journalists' questions based on those factors, or the response options they take to address impoliteness. Finally, as impoliteness in presidential–press discourse is not unique to Trump, further research could be extended to other presidents for deeper insights into the dynamics between press freedom and political power.

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Сажетак

СЛОБОДА ШТАМПЕ НАСУПРОТ ПОЛИТИЧКЕ МОЋИ: КРИТИЧКА АНАЛИЗА ЛИНГВИСТИЧКЕ НЕУЧТИВОСТИ НА ПРЕДСЕДНИЧКИМ КОНФЕРЕНЦИЈАМА ЗА ШТАМПУ

Овај рад анализира употребу лингвистичке неучтивости у дискурсу америчких председничких конференција за штампу и њен утицај на слободу штампе. Примарни циљ истраживања био је да се утврди на које начине амерички председник Доналд Трамп користи лингвистичку неучтивост у комуникацији са новинарима, које дискурзивне функције облици изражавања неучтивости могу да остварују, те какве импликације њихова употреба има на слободу штампе. Истраживачки корпус рада обухвата транскрибоване одломке са четири председничке конференције за штампу одржане у марту и априлу 2020. године, током Трамповог првог председничког мандата, са фокусом на инстанце у којима Трамп користи неучтивост у комуникацији са новинарима. У анализи употребе и облика неучтивости примењује се квалитативни дискурсно-аналитички приступ, који примарно чине теоријско-методолошки оквири Џонатана Калпепера (Culpeper, 2011a) и Дерека Баусфилда (Bousfield, 2008), који неучтивост посматрају као вербалне стратегије угрожавања саговорничког образа и друштвеног положаја. Такође, анализа се ослања на тродимензионални модел критичке анализе дискурса Нормана Ферклафа (Fairclough, 1989; 1995), ради сагледавања односа између моћи, језика и ширег социокултурног контекста на анализираним конференцијама за штампу. Резултати истраживања указују на то да Трамп користи неучтивост како би избегао захтевна питања, обесхрабрио новинаре да их постављају и нарушио кредибилитет штампе у циљу ублажавања критике. Такође се сугерише да лингвистичка неучтивост може да функционише и као механизам за успостављање ауторитета у комуникацији и контролу тока дискурса, као и да перпетуира неједнакост у односу моћи између говорника. Наглашава се да оваква дискурзивна пракса може негативно да утиче на слободу штампе, јер потенцијално подстиче аутоцензуру код новинара, избегавање критички усмереног новинарства, те нарушавање новинарске независности. Стога се закључује да употреба лингвистичке неучтивости од стране председника према новинарима потенцијално ограничава слободу штампе, те да произлази из структурне разлике у односу моћи између председника и новинара. За будућа истраживања предлаже се упоредна анализа интензитета Трамповог конфронтационог односа према штампи током његовог првог и актуелног другог председничког мандата, уз разматрање фактора попут афилијације новинара (нпр. CNN наспрам Fox News) и природе питања која постављају, као и начина на које новинари одговарају на лингвистичку неучтивост.

Кључне речи:

слобода штампе, политичка моћ, неучтивост, прагматика, анализа дискурса, председничке конференције за штампу, новинари