

Political (Un)Culture at Risk: A Critical Reading of Political Speeches in a "Post-Truth" Era

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Abstract

The study presented herewith, shares the results of critical reading and the following linguistic and cultural research of the political discourse as used by Donald Trump's January 6, 2021 speech, which is believed to have provoked violent attacks on the Congress in Washington, D. C. The author focuses on the analysis of specific use of allusion as a semantic modifier, and also refers to other linguistic devices, in which Trump put forward indirect meanings of his speech. The research by Hamed (2021) and Cingerová, Dulebová and Štefančík (2021) served as a theoretical framework for the basis for analysis. As a result, the author arrived at explication of the cultural context of Trump's speech and the weight of the cultural references that he used to manipulate the audience: 1. allusions to the cultural heritage of the USA and 2. the use of polysemantic expressions and 3. the use of emotionally neutral words as allusions to violence in order to manipulate the crowd.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis (CDA), allusion, speech, political discourse, manipulation.

Kľúčové slová: kritická analýza diskurzu (CDA), narážka, prejav, politický diskurz, manipulácia.

Introduction

Research in philological studies, especially in connection to interdisciplinary cultural, political and historical contexts, is becoming increasingly important in an era of rapidly shared contents. Discourses, disseminated via print media, online, and even virally are becoming instruments of power. They, however, often grow into various malign manifestations, such as demagoguery and manipulation. Politicians more and more frequently use methods of subliminal marketing strategies and are increasingly skilled at communicating indirect contents which often occur on the verge of lies, and sometimes beyond them. They often pragmatically exploit the valences of

meanings of polysemantic words and figures of speech, such as metaphors, synecdoches, hyperboles, allusions, and many more. Therefore, linguists and experts in cultural studies face a challenge similar to that of professional political scientists, historians and journalists: to expose and consistently confront public speakers with their statements.

The rhetorical, factual precision and emotional charge of the speeches of the 45th US President Donald Trump, including his controversial speech of January 6, 2021, provides a rich resource for linguistic and political studies of political culture, or, lack thereof (Blake 2021, Hamed 2021, Cingerová, Dulebová, Štefančík 2021). On the other hand, the cultural analysis of Trump's political speeches represents a less explored area. Given twenty-five years of experience in teaching cultural studies to philologists in Slovakia and one-year-expertise in the USA, the author of this study would like to discuss the changes in the political (un)culture of the USA in relation to the linguistic resources of politicians, namely of Donald Trump. In a transdisciplinary study, we will present the results of a linguistic-cultural analysis of three types of allusions and their use in Trump's speech, which were meant to intensify mob aggression, and culminated in the Capitol attack, damage, 138 injuries and 5 deaths. The research confirms that Trump purposefully used and created allusions and transferred implied, aggression-related meanings to listeners through repetition, intonation, and nonverbal cues.

Theoretical and historical context of the research

The USA is a multicultural society with more than two hundred continuous years of democracy, the essence of which is expressed by the motto on the national emblem (*e pluribus unum*, unity in multiplicity). Democratic rights are guaranteed by the US Constitution, which also shapes the basic principles of the presidential elections. The USA uses a majority, single-round electoral system. People do not elect the President directly, but through a body of 538 electors (the Electoral College) who vote for the candidate who has won a popular majority in their state (Štulajterová 2018). U.S. presidential elections can be held at the polls, and can be also conducted electronically and by mail-in ballots (counted by a predetermined date, usually no more than a week after the election).

The 59th US presidential election was in many ways unprecedented. The incumbent President Trump had already announced several times before the elections that they would be rigged, and he still questions the results, so there has not even been a peaceful transfer of power to the next administra-

tion. Trump challenged the legitimacy of elections was during the 6 January 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol (to which Trump summoned members of the right-wing groups, Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, on 19 December 2020), and which ended in the attack on a joint session of the US Congress at the Capitol).

Research corpus (extralinguistic aspects) and methodological outcomes

Trump's speech (10,969 words, lasting approximately 70 minutes) was delivered as part of an announced event (Save America March) at the ellipse in Washington DC. The rally was limited to 250 participants, but the size of the crowd was estimated at up to eight thousand people, mostly supporters of Trump and the Republican Party, representatives of far-right views with visible banners and flags (e.g., the Confederate flag), as well as antivaxxers, ultraright Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, influencers, and non-aligned participants. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CAD) method. Two research questions were raised: What means of expression were used by Trump to communicate with the participants of the rally? and Did Trump use any of the means of expression in the neutral semantic scale of their meaning, or did he consciously emphasize their aggressive interpretative range? Based on V1 and V2, we postulated the hypothesis that, from the linguistic point of view, Trump pragmatically used and created allusions with polysemantic valences of meaning in the speech, thereby inciting the violence that followed.

Linguistic aspects of the speech: critical discourse analysis (CAD)

Structurally, Trump's speech can be divided into a standard introduction (welcoming the attendees, celebrating patriotism and the merits of the Republican Party), the body (devoted to alleged electoral fraud) and a conclusion (providing an extensive list of alleged electoral frauds in the states). In his speech, Trump used thirteen of the fourteen manipulative communicative means identified by Štefančík and Hvasta (2019) as the language of the "far right", excepting only zoology-related terms. These included:

Table 1: The language of the far right in Trump's January 6 speech:

Means of communication	Example(s) from Trump's speech	Implied meaning
Synecdoche	States want to revoke. The states got defrauded...	"The State is US", we, the discontent Republicans represent the USA.
Appealing to the will of the people	...I think a lot of those people are going to find that out and you better start looking at your leadership...	Reference to the importance of the democratic majority.
Overusing pronouns US-THEM	...We beat them four years ago. We surprised them. We took them by surprise and this year they rigged an election...	Stressing the binary opposition and total incompatibility of the two groups.
Hyperbole	We've created the greatest economy in history.	Supporting one's role as the nation's savior.
Adjective referring to skin-colour	And we set a record with Hispanic, with the Black community, we set a record with everybody.	Stressing the tension or antipathy between the whites and the other racial groups.
Black-and-white logics	We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.	Intensifying the sense of urgency, the need for an immediate action.
Scandal-mongering	But Hunter Biden, they don't talk about him. What happened to Hunter?	Demonising the opponents.
Appeal to emotions	Throughout the speech.	To reduce the rational critical revision of his speech.
Invoking a sense of threat	If this happened to the Democrats, there'd be hell all over the country going on.	Same as above, intensifying the sense of urgency, the need for immediate action.
Dramatization	We're gathered together in the heart of our nation's capital for one very, very basic and simple reason: To save our democracy.	Limiting the potential rational critical revision of his speech.
Insulting opponents	Trump calls his opponents "stupid" five times and calls the election results "bullsh**"	Demonizing the opponents.
Conspiracy theories	So in Pennsylvania, you had 205,000 more votes than you had voters.	Justifying aggression as an unavoidable special action to be taken in extraordinary times.

Presenting oneself as a charismatic personality	Trump mentions, for example, his invitation to be among the top five personalities on the Oprah Winfrey's show.	Building up the narrative of one's importance.
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Source: author, based on Trump's speech

In this study, however, we would like to draw attention to one more manipulative means Donald Trump uses very effectively – the allusion. Lamačková (2021: 154) recognizes allusion, along with implicature and presupposition, among the important means to achieve political goals.

An allusion (a figure of speech, or trope) is an indirect reference to a political, historical or literary context or personality (Franko 1994), which brings an idea into the mind of the hearer indirectly, without explicitly mentioning it (MW 2022), and gives meaning to it in a sentence whether it is revealed or not. There are several taxonomies of allusions (Thomas 1986; Butler, Butler 2006) and they include cultural, historical, and political allusions, e.g., Remember the Alamo, Encounter Waterloo, or Expect Világos (indicating a major defeat in a physical fight, without directly mentioning the terms: battle, fight, physical or other violent clash, counting on the listener's ability to decode the cultural and historical context of the information).

Another example of an allusion is the greeting of the MP of the People's Social Democratic Party (ĽSNS), Marian Kotleba, "Beautiful *white* day" (cited by Lutherová 2022), which is not a political allusion, but becomes one, in the context of the communication in question. At the same time, the allusion is often linked to the cultural realia of the speaker, which a foreigner may not decode correctly or not at all. So was the controversial charity gift of the aforementioned Marian Kotleba (1488 Euros) pointing out to the Nazi paraphernalia. However, even native speakers in such a communicative situation have to choose an interpretative modus, or a semantic valence layer, which the speaker assigns to the allusion on the interpretative scale. Trump is master of using ambiguous language but transferring very specific meanings. In his January 6 speech, he uses and even creates three types of allusions, which, as we will demonstrate in the next section of the paper, have contributed to the escalation of violence.

Allusions to U.S. cultural artefacts

Trump makes very effective use of declarative patriotism to polarise society into 'patriots' and a broad group of 'the other'. To underscore his patriotism, he repeatedly mentions U.S. political icons, e.g. the Capitol and Pennsylvania Avenue: "I know that everybody who's here will soon be marching to the Capitol and peacefully and patriotically letting their voices be heard [...] So we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue – I love Pennsylvania Avenue – and we're going to the Capitol. And we're going to try to give them [...] the pride and the courage that they need to take back our country. So let's take a walk down Pennsylvania Avenue."

The use of these cultural references is not accidental. It is in these very references to the cultural heritage of the United States that there are many implicit meanings that indirectly encourage political activism or disobedience. According to EB (2022), the Capitol building is one of the most iconic symbols of the US democracy. The cornerstone was laid by George Washington on September 18, 1793, and since 1801, when he became the third president, Thomas Jefferson, all subsequent inaugurations have taken place here. Except for 2021, the Capitol was only destroyed by British troops in 1814.

Another keystone place in the US cultural history, mentioned in the speech, is Pennsylvania Avenue (2.4 km). It is also called "Main Street of America" or "Corridor of Power", and it crosses the central part of the capital, government buildings on both sides between the Capitol and the White House. It is also the location of Ford's Theatre, where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865. It is also the traditional route of major presidential, inaugural, funeral, and other parades, including the march to celebrate the end of the Civil War, the Suffragette March (1913), the Ku Klux Klan (1925), and the bloodily suppressed Veterans Day Parade (1932). Because of its history, it is a place with a strong political message, and the mere suggestion of a protest march down Pennsylvania Avenue is a powerful political gesture (in 1941, the mention of a possible march of 100,000 African-American men down the boulevard caused a change in discriminatory laws).

Trump also once mentions the figure of President Abraham Lincoln and his Gettysburg address. Culturally, Lincoln is a significant role model for Republicans. Mimicking Lincoln during the Civil War, Trump also styles himself as the "unifier of the nation" (McBride 2021), and by referring to Republicans as a *boxer with his hands tied*, Trumps' attempt to make the connection between Lincoln the martyr, and the effort to reverse the election results.

The aforementioned cultural artefacts appeal to the cultural memory of Trump's audience. On a second level of meaning, they have a very strong political symbolism and the march for them inevitably becomes a political act (EB 2022). At the same time, through allusions to these cultural icons, the speaker purposefully transfers the information that the march of the election challengers will unite the nation and is equivalent to the march of oppressed suffragettes and African Americans fighting for their human and civil rights.

Allusions to a polysemantic range of meaning

In addition to cultural and historical allusions, Trump also uses polysemantic words in a seemingly neutral, abstract sense, but, by repeating and emphasizing them frequently, he transfers to his audience a reference to their literal, aggression-related meaning(s). In his speech, he uses the lexeme *fight* twenty times, at least seven times in contexts emphasizing the use of force. For example, he says: *...And we're going to have to fight much harder. [...] And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. [...] So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue...* The crowd spontaneously responds to Trump's suggestions: *Fight for Trump*.

The lexeme *fight* contains two primary meanings on the interpretive scale: the primary, literal meaning: 1. Being engaged in a battle or physical attack (noun *fight* = hostile encounter) and the secondary, figurative meaning: 2. exchanging views (MW 2022). To intensify its aggressive interpretation, Trump used not only the lexeme *fight*, but also a variety of its synonyms, implying force: *to show strength, to fight harder, to take back the country*. Although Blake (2021) argues that the ex-president never used the term *fight* in its literal meaning, by opposing and emphasizing the word, he made an allusion out of it and transposed its concrete, violent, rather than figurative meaning to the mob. Individual accounts of the participants in the violence interviewed later confirmed, that they understood Trump's words about fighting for their country as an invitation (PBS 2022) to enter the Capitol building and protest in any way they could.

The use of the expression *fighting for the country* also has a very strong cultural connotation in the USA. Trump repeatedly appealed that those who do not fight for their country (i.e. do not protest against the legitimate election results) are committing a violation of democratic principles and freedom of speech as in "communist countries". This is a very strong critical narrative in the USA, the "cradle" of modern democracy and free speech.

Allusions created through semantically neutral lexemes

Trump not only used historical allusions and second meanings in his speech, he also created allusions out of neutral expressions, completely unrelated to aggression and violence: He urged participants to *walk down* to the Capitol (six times) and to *cheer* some congressmen and congresswomen (others, however, will not be *cheered* so much; twice).

Lexemes *walk (down)* and *cheer* do not contain any aggressive interpretation in any of the meanings, suggested by MW (2022). However, the speaker's intonation and repetition draws attention to them and communicates a meaning other than the established one: to walk means to invade, to attack, and to cheer (but not to cheer some of the congressmen in the second part of the communication implies an activity at least contrary to polite behaviour). Again, these expressions have a cultural dimension: In the USA, politics is *res publica*, and many states and politicians prefer direct, personal contact with a constituent or supporter. In individual states, it is possible to participate directly in public policy and attend sessions of representative bodies (usually requiring only formal registration before entering the building). By inviting people to march on the Capitol building and cheer congressmen, Trump appeals to this specific, personal nature of American politics as something to which the voter has a legal right.

Discussion

Through a linguistic and cultural analysis of Trump's January 6 speech, we have shown that, at the top of a list of linguistic means of manipulation (elaborated by Štefančík and Hvasta 2019 and Štefančík et al. 2021), he made very effective use of one more means – allusion – to incite the mob. He used allusions an unconventional but extremely effective way. He integrated into his speech allusions to the cultural memory of the USA, subliminally referring to the political legacy of significant places and personalities in American history, allusions to the literal interpretation of a range of polysemantic meanings (fight) and specific allusions he created by over-repeating and emphasizing neutral expressions (e.g. *walk down*, *cheer*).

We identified Trump's expressive devices as allusions, although semantically they could fall into multiple categorizations (e.g., *walk*, *cheer* as a contextual euphemism, or irony to the lexeme *invasion*). We cannot consider Trump's rhetorical devices as political allusions in the strict sense of the word. However, he uses a variety of cultural allusions, or the creates al-

lusions out of polysemantic expressions with the appeal to their cultural context.

The question remains to be answered as to how consciously Trump was using allusions and their cultural contexts to incite violence. Indeed, the subject of his appeal is the interpretation of the ambiguous terms in question, with Trump's lawyer arguing that his client used them in an exclusively figurative sense, thus turning the political dispute into a linguistic problem. On the other hand, the Democrats, with whom we agree, claim that he used the allusions purposefully to incite violence, which is a criminal offence in the US, as well as in Slovakia. There are several arguments for the purpose of the speech: 1. Trump had already invited far-right groups to a rally by e-mail on 19 December 2020, and he was aware of their propensity for violence and unruly past; 2. Leading figures in Trump's administration had been warned of a likely escalation of violence (Trump's chief-of-staff, Mark Meadows, was informed in advance by the Secret Service about the likelihood of violence from the participants, Amiri 2020). Moreover, between 1:10 pm, when the mob attacked Congress, and 4:17 pm when Trump sends the first tweet telling the mob to stop the violence is the so-called 187 minutes of inaction when he did not interfere in any way with the ongoing insurrection (except for brief, unconvincing tweets).

Answering the aforementioned question, however, also requires a linguistic analysis: Trump had enough acoustic and visual information about the crowd's behavior even during the speech and, as a veteran speaker, he could have tailored the speech to emphasize conciliation (he mentioned the peaceful course only once). The aforementioned linguistic and extralinguistic information point to the fact that Trump was counting on violence as another form of his political action to maintain power. It served as a pragmatic, expressive means of political discourse as defined by Štefančík (2021) and Dulebová (2012), and as a form of social and political action [...] at the end of which is not only the acquisition of power, but also as its maintenance and vindication in the next election.

Populism and its manifestations, including the manipulative use of allusions, can be considered a benign form of political discourse, because the means through which the populist achieves his methods often occur on the verge of good taste, or the law, and can lead to the decline of democracy (Cingerová, Dulebová, Štefančík 2021: 35). They also contribute significantly to what Moffitt (2018) refers to as the era of 'post-truth politics', where emotions run over facts. In the post-truth fashion, Trump attacks the essence of the liberal democracy by language, that is ostensibly neutral, but in fact achieves his purpose, i.e. to incite his audience to violent action.

Conclusion

Trump's January 6 speech shows that respecting democratic principles and maintaining "unity in plurality" is not a guaranteed, even in a country with the longest continuous democratic tradition in the history of modern civilization. A veteran of political speeches, Trump, through his pragmatic rhetoric, was able to manipulate the emotions of the mob like a virtuoso. After a thorough linguistic and cultural analysis, we confirm that, in what was probably his most controversial speech, Trump effectively used polysemantic semantic allusions and reinforced violent behavior of the crowd.

The language of politicians is becoming an increasingly powerful tool for the dissemination of indirect political messages, but also of political (un)culture. A politician can be uncultured, vague, ambiguous and manipulative only to the extent that the public and the media allow him to be. The listener of such political discourse must be doubly alert, must constantly cultivate his or her ability to think critically, based on the analysis of context, the confrontation of known and new information, but above all on the separation of the factual, linguistic and emotional components of the statement. Therefore, the critical perception of public speeches poses challenges, not only for political scientists, but also for educators, cultural studies and linguists. Experts confirm that, critical reading and thinking, as well as knowledge of cultural contexts are among the key global skills required in modern times (Pecníková, Slatinská 2016, Zelenková, Hanesová 2020, Ponderlíková 2021).

Thus, there is a new social need for the language of politicians to be as precise as possible; they should not be tolerated by the civil and professional public to be vague and ambiguous in meaning, enabling and potentially inciting expressions of hatred or even violence. This is another call for a critical listener, reader and thinker, in both native and foreign languages, who is aware of cultural contexts (Kolečani-Lenčová 2020). It is also a call to confront politicians with the content of their public speeches. Otherwise, political culture will find itself in danger of its essence, which lies on tolerance of different opinion, but also in fairness and truth of the political discourse.

Funding acknowledgement

This article is the outcome of the project VEGA 1/0118/20: Dyslexia as a linguistic-cognitive disorder and its symptoms in developing reading literacy in mother and foreign (English) Tongue; VEGA 1/0538/21: Cultural

Memory of European Capitals and KEGA 008UMB-4/2022: University education as a gateway to thinking: integration of reading, academic and critical skills as a precondition to intellectual capital of universities and internationalisation of education.

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