

# Populism in performance? Trump on the stump and his audience

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## Abstract

Much commentary on the discourse of Donald Trump's populist appeal has tended to focus on his social media presence, in particular on his use of Twitter, to the relative neglect of his campaign rallies. Yet his campaign rallies during the 2016 presidential election were arguably the critical vehicle for delivering the crucial votes which secured his victory. Members of his own team, and Trump himself, certainly thought so.

Since the election Trump has continued to campaign in rallies in key states with increasing vigour, attracting large and enthusiastic audiences as the second term elections in 2020 approach.

These large-scale public events dramatically enact the bond between Trump and his base. But they also provide an opportunity for research to re-focus attention beyond Trump as controversial populist political figure to the process of mutual engagement between Trump the speaker and his highly active and vocal audience.

This article, partly through discourse analysis of Trump's speeches but also through close examination of the verbal, vocal and gestural behaviour of participants at his rallies poses the question: "Is the audience Trump's creation or is Trump the audience's creation?"

Key words: applause; audience response; conversationalisation; discourse; discourse plane; gesture; live audience; political speeches; rhetoric.

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## 1.0 Introduction: Trump's campaign rally speeches: the research paradox

"The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in."

— George Orwell, *1984*

"One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding."

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

This article will explore the close interaction between Trump and his followers in the context of his many rally speeches as a kind of ongoing conversation -- a dialogue of call and response. In this way, the emphasis will not be so much on Trump's discourse considered as isolated monologues, but as a component in a dynamic and evolving dialogue between him and his audience.

It must be recognized, of course, from the outset, that the presidency of Donald J. Trump has, for many commentators, been defined by his use of social media -- especially Twitter -- from the moment he declared his candidacy in 2015. Indeed, by the beginning of 2020 he was credited with more than 70 million Twitter followers; and his tweets are widely reported and discussed in the more traditional mainstream media of press and broadcasting. Against this background, academic researchers have understandably devoted much attention to the character of this social media presence with detailed explorations of its style, its content, and its electoral impact. (See, for example, Kissas, A., 2019; Kreis, R., 2017; Ott, B. and Dickinson, 2019; Pain, P. and Masillo Chen, 2019; Schill, D. and Hendricks, 2018; and Zompetti, J., 2019). In this way considerably more attention has been devoted to Trump's virtual social media presence than to his actual visible physical presence at rallies up and down the U.S., not only during the Presidential campaign itself, but at the many rallies he has continued to address during the months and years of his presidency. This close interest in his social media presence is reflected in the compilation by *Business Insider* of Trump's 30 most famous quotes since becoming president: 10 are tweets, eight are from press conferences or media interviews, and only three are from his rallies<sup>1</sup>.

Yet Trump's public-speaking engagements would warrant detailed attention if only for their sheer scale and concentration. In the final nine days of his 2016 campaign, for instance, he spoke at 32 rallies: six times in Florida; five times in North Carolina; five times in Pennsylvania; four times in Michigan; as well as at events in Iowa, Ohio, Wisconsin and elsewhere. In the event, these states were to prove a significant element in the final result, returning the crucial votes that secured Trump his majority in the Electoral College. They included states that previously voted Democrat (in support of Obama), such as Florida. It was, in effect, in these very states that Trump forged his electoral base, winning support often against the expectations of analysts and commentators.

But Trump did not give up campaigning when he entered the White House. On the contrary, he has continued energetically to reach out directly to his base, routinely appearing at rallies up and down the country. In 2018 alone -- barely half-way through his first term -- he addressed nearly 50 rallies, including events in Nevada (three), Florida (three), Ohio (three), West Virginia (three), Mississippi (two), Missouri (three), Pennsylvania (three), Tennessee (three), as well as Texas and Illinois. These events were well-attended, drawing large crowds of between 10,000 and 20,000. The Washington Post's careful audit of nine rallies arrived at a total figure for these nine rallies of 100,922 -- a deliberately cautious, conservative estimate. Trump, of course, claims many more.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: *Business Insider* <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-quotes-since-becoming-president-2018-6?r=US&IR=T>  
Accessed 24.01.2020

Indeed, Trump – it will not surprise -- has a high opinion of his performance as a public speaker. “I happen to enjoy giving speeches”, he says in his self-help book, *How to Get Rich*. “I get so much energy from my audiences that it is always fun...Tuning into people is the first step. I’m good at that, and I don’t have to try too hard...Involve your audience. They will appreciate being included” (Trump, D.J., 2004: 62-64). But this is not only Trump’s view. It is shared by his close advisers. Steve Bannon, who as Chief Executive Officer oversaw the final crucial months of Trump’s presidential bid and who then served as White House Chief Strategist during the first months of Trump’s presidency, has claimed that Trump is America’s greatest orator since William Jennings Bryan:

Trump is probably the greatest public speaker in ... large arenas since William Jennings Bryan<sup>2</sup>.

Elsewhere Bannon has developed this comparison in the following way:

His oratory -- and it shows you how people yearn for this still -- I mean his oratory is very powerful.

He is -- he is the greatest speechmaker – orator -- obviously I think in modern political history. I think it’s only been one other, William Jennings Bryan, who is also a populist.

But you cannot do three, four, five of these rallies a day, and come in fresh and galvanize an audience. If you go back, and if you were sitting there live, it was just incredible -- I mean the entire campaign, because we didn’t have a lot of money, it wasn’t really a modern campaign in the fact that we didn’t do a lot of TV.

We didn’t do -- I mean, we took the model of data mining and targeting and all that, and coupled it with an old fashioned, you know, just let’s get this guy out and get him in front of the biggest crowd as possible. But the oratory is spell binding. I think he’s a spell-binding speaker.

And if you look at the audience, they are engaged. I mean how many people will wait eight, ten, twelve hours in line? We used to do a thing at the end to bring up the person who was in line first, and people would have been there 24 hours.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to William Jennings Bryan may seem at first sight obscure. Bryan’s fame dates from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when as a political orator he rose to prominence in the U.S. Democratic Party, standing three times as their nominee for the Presidency. In particular, his “Cross of Gold” speech is considered one of the great political speeches in American history (see Widmer, 2006; Golway, 2012). In referring to Bryan, Bannon is thus recalling a tradition of political campaigning that long predates the advent of broadcasting and digital media, when political success depended on voice and print rather than TV and microblogging. Hence the paradox: a 21<sup>st</sup> century politician who is best known for his tweets – at least among commentators and academics – may owe his high office to his ability to galvanise large rallies by his speeches. For while Trump may address the political and media establishment (often confrontationally) through his Tweets, it is by means of his frequent rallies that he has appealed to, and consolidated, his electoral base. In this sense, Trump’s microblogs are something of a distraction. The real political work of building and

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<sup>2</sup> Bannon in interview at the Conservative Political Action Conference, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2017.

<https://time.com/4681697/steve-bannon-donald-trump-william-jennings-bryan/>  
(Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> May, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Bannon in televised interview with Charlie Rose, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/30951>.  
(Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2020) (My transcript)

maintaining support has been continuously performed to one side of the micro-blogsphere, off the Twitter stage, once or twice a week, at large gatherings in Florida, Ohio, West Virginia and elsewhere in the rust belt states where he won election in 2016. In effect, it is in these large-scale live events that populism can be observed in performance (Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2017). Accordingly, this article will explore the discursive dynamics of Trump's rallies using a blend of critical discourse analysis and conversational analysis. In doing so, the emphasis will fall not so much on Trump's discourse considered as isolated monologues, but as a component in a dynamic and evolving dialogue between him and his audience.

## **2.0 From William Jennings Bryan to Donald J. Trump: The conversationalisation and informalisation of public discourse**

Elsewhere (Montgomery, 2017) I have described features of Trump's speaking style at rallies as a form of vernacular folksiness, full of lexical repetition and conversational direct address, incorporating many features of Bernstein's restricted code. In this respect, Bannon's comparison of Trump with Bryan rests not so much on similarities of style or content (Bryan, after all, was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Democrat) but on a comparative assessment of their respective impact in large arenas. Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech was delivered to an audience of thousands without microphone or public address system at the Democratic convention of 1896. To gain a flavour of Bryan's rhetorical style, we should consider briefly just two examples. His theme was an attack on the use of the Gold Standard in international finance and trade, and the speech indeed gained its name from the final phrase of his peroration:

- (1) Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the labouring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labour this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold".

His conclusion was met initially with silence, then shortly followed by tumultuous applause. As the Washington Post of the day reported, "bedlam broke loose, delirium reigned supreme", and it took about 25 minutes to restore order.

Otherwise the section of his speech that prompted the most reaction was the following, where in defence of the common people against the narrow interests of business (Bryan himself was known as "The Great Commoner") he attacked arguments in favour of the Gold Standard by radically redefining the concept of a 'businessman'.

- (2) We say to you that you have made the definition of a businessman too limited in its application. The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer; the attorney in a country town is as much a businessman as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis; the merchant at the cross-roads store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York; the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, who begins in spring and toils all summer, and who by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of the country creates wealth, is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain; .... We come to speak of this broader class of businessmen.

In these two examples from Bryan we see features often noted in discussions of political rhetoric (Charteris Black, 2018; Martin, 2014; Atkinson, 1984; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986; Higgins, 2009). In example 1, above, his peroration winds to a close with a striking two-part metaphor, in the first part of which labour is likened to a Christ figure and the Gold Standard to a crown of thorns, and in the second part of which mankind is likened again to Christ and the act of imposing the Gold Standard to Christ's crucifixion. These two parts are in parallel with each other, bound together by semantic, lexical and grammatical repetition using the same grammatical frame, "You shall not *Verb + Object + Adjunct*".

The second example comprises an extended set of parallel structures in which representative examples of the common or ordinary people are drawn together inclusively to challenge a narrow and restrictive definition of the businessman.

(3)  
 The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer;  
 the attorney in a country town is as much a businessman as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis;  
 the merchant at the cross-roads store is as much a business man as the merchant of New York;  
 the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day,  
     who begins in spring and toils all summer,  
     and who by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of the country creates wealth,  
 is as much a businessman as the man  
     who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain....

The passage is tightly structured, again using a basic grammatical frame "The X {man, farmer, etc.} is as much a businessman as Y", though the elements that fill the frame become progressively more elaborated as the frame is repeated. On most measures of syntactic complexity these structures are complex, extend over considerable lengths, and in fact become progressively more complex as they are repeated. They are hypotactic involving much syntactic embedding with one clause tucked inside another.

Compare this kind of elaborated structure with a typical passage from a rally speech by Trump.

(4)  
 We love winners. We love winners. Winners are winners.  
 Bobby, Jack Nicklaus, Tiger. How about Tiger, the comeback he's -- right?  
 Tiger.  
 / [APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxx 6.0 xxx]  
 Did you see the fake news tried to fake out Tiger? They didn't do too well.  
 Tiger's sharp.  
 No, we love winners. We love winners.  
 Our country is becoming a winner, and our country is respected again. You see that.  
 / [APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x xxXXX 11.0 XXXxx x x]  
 We've created not millions, not billions, but trillions of dollars of wealth in just a short time since our election.  
 Trillions.  
 / [APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxxx 7.0 xxxx x x]  
 And we're the talk of the world. I'll tell you, every foreign leader who comes to see me, almost, they walk in and they start off, "Mr. President, Congratulations on the incredible success you're having with your economy. Congratulations."  
 Everything. Almost everyone.  
 / [APPLAUSE cheering clapping x xxx 7.0 xxxx x x]

On any measure of complexity this passage is much simpler<sup>4</sup> than the examples from Bryan's Cross of Gold speech. Trump relies heavily on repetition ("We love winners" is repeated four times; there are four references to the golfer, Tiger Woods). He uses short, sometimes even elliptical sentences ("Tiger....Trillions....Everything.....Almost everyone"). Overall there is a kind of self-evident, repetitive circularity about its progress: "winners are winners", reinforced with the use of a list (in this case, of famous, winning golfers: "Bobby (Jones), Jack Nicklaus, Tiger (Woods)"). If the principle of organisation in Bryan's speech is hypotactic, with one clause embedded inside another building into complex parallel structures, Trump's discourse by contrast may be described as paratactic or additive, with one discrete simple structure paving the way to the next. It rests, in addition, on a kind of 'vernacular folksiness' (Montgomery, 2017), speaking - for instance - directly to its audience in question and response:

How about Tiger, the comeback he's -- right? Tiger... Did you see the fake news tried to fake out Tiger? They didn't do too well. Tiger's sharp. No, we love winners...You see that.

At times Trump takes the audience into his confidence with fragments of simulated interaction:

I'll tell you, every foreign leader who comes to see me, almost, they walk in and they start off, "Mr. President, congratulations on the incredible success you're having with your economy".

Trump may indeed be "the greatest public speaker in ... large arenas since William Jennings Bryan" but -- as we can see from the examples -- he draws upon a very different discursive repertoire than the latter. Indeed, the difference between the two speeches most likely reflects more than a stylistic difference between two quite different individuals but a fundamental shift between two rhetorical eras. As such these two speeches illustrate a larger, if discontinuous, movement in public discourse from relatively elaborated, formal, rhetorical styles to more pithy, interactive, conversational styles -- a tendency summed up by Fairclough and others as the conversationalisation and informalisation of public discourse (see, for example, Fairclough, 1992; Pearce, 2005; and Scannell, 2014: Ch.8). And it is the way in which he harnesses this highly contemporary, conversational, informal idiom, even in large arenas to packed audiences, that provides the essential medium for his appeal to his base

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<sup>4</sup> Hunston (2017) provides further commentary on Trump's avoidance of complexity: "by a number of measures his grammar is simple: his sentences are shorter and he uses fewer nouns compared with the number of verbs, and far fewer noun-noun combinations."

### 3.0 Trump's speech-making: two planes of discourse - *Direct Discourse* versus *Oblique Discourse*

Trump's repetitive, elliptical, allusive, and informal conversational style on the stump gives strong indications of being delivered ad lib and extempore. Perhaps more than any other contemporary politician he seems to shape his utterance in situ in real time. This, indeed, is in line with the claim in his autobiography that he prefers to speak directly to the audience, without notes. Nonetheless, teleprompters are in place at his rally venues and in practice he does make occasional use of them for the outline of what he intends to say. This is indicated by the way he alternates his direction of gaze between two basic orientations. In one he looks directly ahead towards a fixed camera which frames him in mid-shot against a background of a section of the audience positioned behind him, as exemplified by the following.



(5) *Direct Discourse*: "But you know what? What they put my family through is a disgrace and they ought to be ashamed" {Battle Creek, Michigan, December 18, 2019}



(6) *Direct Discourse*: "It wasn't me. It was all of us. It was all of us"

{Mississippi, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018}

In the other orientation his direction of gaze is angled toward his left (predominantly), or his right, rather than straight ahead.



(7) *Oblique Orientation* "so yesterday I sent Pelosi a letter denouncing and condemning..."

{Battle Creek, Michigan, December 18, 2019}

The first orientation we call “Direct Orientation”<sup>5</sup> (following Brazil, 1985), since in this mode his direction of gaze is most clearly toward his audience. The second we call “Oblique Orientation”, since in this mode his focus is less on the audience as much as on the text supplied on the teleprompter. At their most basic level, these two orientations overlap with two contrasting kinesic or body-sets (Birdwhistell, 1970). In “Oblique Orientation” Trump typically rests both hands on the lectern (sometimes tapping the side of the lectern at the onset with his right hand if his direction of gaze is to the left). In “Direct Orientation”, however, Trump is gesturally more open and mobile, using a wider range of gesture -- especially varieties of pointing. Significantly, the two orientations coincide with shifts in voice-set. In “Oblique Orientation”, turned towards the teleprompter, there is less prosodic variation: rhythm, volume and pitch are more constant – louder, higher and more regular – than in “Direct Orientation”. “Direct Orientation”, by contrast, is more variable – as might be expected for an orientation focused more directly on the audience.

Overall, “Direct Orientation” exceeds “Oblique Orientation” in Trump’s campaign speeches by a factor of 9 or 10 to 1<sup>6</sup>. Coinciding with these two orientations are two kinds of discourse plane. “Oblique Discourse” draws on more conceptual detail, more complete syntactic structures and a wider vocabulary. “Direct Discourse” is more repetitive, more reliant on question and answer, with a greater use of simulated interaction. Essentially “Oblique Discourse” provides a series of occasional talking points, from which Trump side-slips into “Direct Discourse” rather like a jazz musician playing with a set of improvised licks.

“Direct Discourse” and “Oblique Discourse” thus constitute two separate “planes” of discourse (Coulthard and Montgomery, 1981; Hazadiah Mohamed Dahan 1991, 1993; Montgomery 1977; Sinclair, 1966) involving different principles of composition (improvised versus scripted) and different orientations (to the audience or to a teleprompter). In essence, “Oblique Discourse” for Trump simply provides a rudimentary scaffold for his speech, but the real performance of working and engaging with the audience is done ad lib in “Direct Discourse”.

#### **4.0 Projecting audience response: the individual and the collective; invited versus uninvited applause**

Trump’s audiences on the stump are highly reactive, breaking into sustained applause, or other kinds of affiliative (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986) (or disaffiliative) vocalization (such as booing or cheering), as much as every 15 seconds or 50 words during a rally speech that can last an hour. Whatever the frequency and intensity of these responses, however, the problem of timing their placement remains. Thus, Atkinson’s classic study of applause in

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<sup>5</sup> Brazil’s original distinction (1985) relates to moment by moment choices in intonation as a communicative system. It has here been applied to stretches of discourse as a combined social-semiotic act.

<sup>6</sup> “Oblique discourse” tends to occur at or near the beginning of a campaign rally speech and in middle sections when Trump may invite local political figures onto the stage and introduce them to the audience by name.

political speeches (1984) notes the overarching problem of applauding in unison: how does an audience consisting of several thousand discrete individuals coordinate their responses in such a way that their actions are unified and shared? Effectively, in order for an audience to act together appropriately they must share an understanding of when and how to do so. Shared understanding and the appropriate placement of response is supported or prompted by various cues in the speaker's discourse: for instance, responses are most likely to occur at the end of a syntactic or prosodic unit such as a sentence or pitch sequence. Most significantly, however, the discourse may be patterned or shaped in such a way to accentuate the relevance of and appropriacy of response. Atkinson highlights two patterns in particular: lists of three and contrastive pairs. When Trump is in "Oblique Discourse", reading from a script, three-part sequences consisting of parallel units, as exemplified by the following examples (8-10), are not uncommon:

- (8)           a. the economy is booming  
              b. wages are rising  
              c. and more Americans are working today than ever before
- (9) I'm thrilled to be here with thousands of hardworking patriots as we celebrate  
      a. the miracle of Christmas,  
      b. the greatness of America  
      c. and the glory of God.  
              Thank you very much
- (10)        They [=Democrats] want to  
              a. demolish our Constitution  
              b. weaken our military  
              c. eliminate the values that built this magnificent country

These three-part structures or sequences correspond closely to what Atkinson (1984) described as 'clap-traps': they are occasions where applause is not only relevant but more deliberately invited by the shaping and patterning of the discourse (Bull, 2006).

Clap-traps and invited applause, however, occur proportionately far less in "Direct Discourse" than in "Oblique Discourse". Nonetheless, in "Direct Discourse", the responses of the audience are -- if anything -- regular, enthusiastic and intense. Overall, therefore, the interaction between Trump and his audience does not depend greatly on the carefully crafted and shaped patterns typical of traditional rhetoric. It seems to be fueled by something else. It is to these 'uninvited' forms of applause (see Bull, 2006) mostly in "Direct Discourse" that we now turn.

## 5.0 The repertoire of audience responses/modalities of participation

First of all, it is important to note that the range of audience responses to Trump's campaign speeches consists of much more than simple applause or clapping (a point noted by Bull, 2006 & 2016, in his discussion of work by Atkinson, 1984, and Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986). Trump's audiences *cheer*, *boo*, *chant*, *laugh* and *gesticulate*, often combining different kinds of response in complex ways. For the purpose of analysis only responses where the combination of behaviours extends over several seconds (a minimum of four) are considered.

### 5.1 Clapping

The most straightforward kind of audience response consists simply of clapping. The optimum length of this kind of applause is 8 seconds (+ or – 1), though for the purposes of transcription there are issues of precise timing. An initial scatter of applause can reach a peak soon after its onset and then attain a sustained plateau for 6 seconds or so, before subsiding at the end.

(11)  
they did it all because they refuse to accept the results (.)  
of one of the greatest (.) Presidential elections  
[(DT raises single forefinger)]  
↳probably number one (.) ↑↳in our history (right)  
|x x x x | x x x xxxXXXX 9.0 xxx x x|  
{March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Grand Rapids, Michigan}

### 5.2 Cheering and clapping

Much more common than simple clapping is a combination of cheering and clapping:

(12)  
we've done more (.) together (.) in the first two years (.)  
than ANY administration  
in the history of our country  
/[cheering clapping x x xxxXX 12.0 XXXXXxxxxxxx]  
{March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Grand Rapids, Michigan}

### 5.3 Booing

On the face of it, *booing* by the audience may be seen as simply the inverse of *cheering*. But, whereas *cheering* is for the main part closely associated with applause, *booing* is normally freestanding.

(13)  
the crazy attempt by the Democrat party  
and the fake news media right back there  
[B0000 7.0 0000]  
and the deep state (.)  
to overturn the results of the 2016 election (.) have failed  
{March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Grand Rapids, Michigan}

In addition, the trigger for *booing* -- as will be discussed later in further detail -- is more selective than the trigger for *cheering*, consisting mainly of selection from one of a rogue's gallery of known villains: Adam Schiff, or Nancy Pelosi, for instance, or fake news media. *Booing* may on occasion combine with *clapping*, as in the following (15), but on these occasions the *clapping* is more scattered and less sustained

(14)  
the corrupt media  
[(DT points with horizontal sweep)][Audience behind mimics point and horizontal sweep]  
and it's never been more corrupt than it is toda:::y  
[/clapping booing x x x B0000 6.5 0000/]  
{March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Grand Rapids, Michigan}

The activities of applauding by *clapping* and *booing* are, of course, less semantically cognate and for this reason they combine much less frequently than *clapping* and *cheering* where two kinds of affiliative actions merge together. Overall, *cheering* combined with *clapping* outnumbers *booing* by a factor of 3 to 1.



(24) Four more years, Four more years, Four more years, ...

Occasionally a single word or an abbreviation will suffice:

(25) Trump, Trump, Trump, ...

(26) U S A, U S A, U S A, ...

The simple syllabic structure facilitates the task of synchronising the performance of the chant. It is noticeable that *chants* tend to last a great deal longer than *laughter* or *booing* or even applause.

### 5.6 Gesticulating

*Cheering* and *chanting* may be accompanied by forms of sign-waving.



(27) And did you see the new polls for USA Today came out? I'm killing everybody.  
And they hate me. USA Today hates me. {Battle Creek, Michigan, December 18, 2019}



(28) "Four more years, Four more years, Four more years"

{Battle Creek, Michigan, 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2019}



*In the first image Trump is shown gesticulating towards the media (“the corrupt media”) stationed at the rear of the arena with a pointing and sweeping gesture. In the subsequent image, almost coincidentally, male members of the audience (immediately to the left and right of Trump) are shown gesticulating with a thumbs-down movement which coincides with a bout of booing.*

(29)

the corrupt media (.)

[[DT point and horizontal sweep]][Audience behind gestures with thumbs down]]

and it's never been more corrupt than it is toda:::y

[/clapping booing x x x B O

000000 6.5 0000/]

{March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Grand Rapids, Michigan}



(30) Two figures in the lower right hand corner of the frame above are shown using the 'thumbs up' gesture.

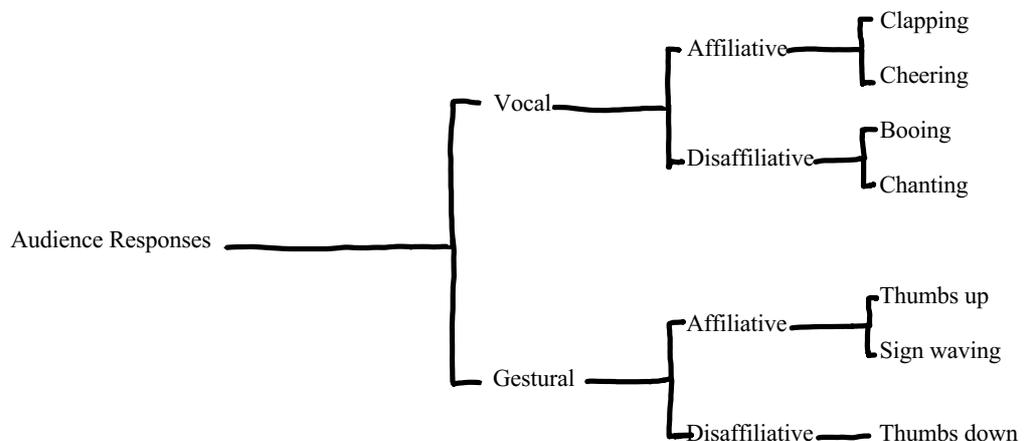


(31) Many figures in the left-hand half of the frame above (both foreground and background) are shown using the 'thumbs down' gesture.



(32) Two figures in the lower right-hand corner of the frame above are shown using the 'thumbs down' gesture.

The range of audience responses is thus wide and complex in its realisations. Broadly, however, they divide along an axis between responses which are either:(a) positive towards Trump, and his achievements, towards the locale of the rally wherever it might be, and towards supporters or affiliates of Trump; or (b) negative towards those considered to be opponents of Trump. Fundamentally, in other words, responses are either 'affiliative' or 'disaffiliative'. Diagrammatically, the types and meanings of the responses can be modelled as follows:



## 6.0 Further Characteristics of Trump's *Direct Discourse*

This repertoire of responses is, of course, exactly that – a set of responses to aspects of Trump's performance. As indicated earlier, Trump's rally speeches<sup>7</sup> consist not so much of the performance of a script or pre-prepared text ("Oblique Discourse") but rather they consist of an extempore improvisation that spins off and away from the autocue to react to the exigencies of the occasion or its broader context (in "Direct Discourse"). Several features of his "Direct Discourse" I enumerate in Montgomery 2017. Here I will try and relate features of "Direct Discourse" where possible to the audience's actions, reactions and responses.

### 6.1 *Phrasal Repetition as Coda, Reinforcement, and Response-Invitation*

Trump often uses phrasal repetition to sum up or reinforce a point. In the following closely connected examples from the same speech the repetition of the phrase leads directly into applause consisting of *cheering* and *clapping*, with the second incidence of applause lasting longer than the first.

(34)

This is what we're dealing with. You know, we're dealing with some very bad people. We're dealing with people that don't respect you. And by the way, you know they talk about the elite? You're the elite. They're not the elite. You're the elite.

/[APPLAUSE cheering + clapping x xxx 7.0 xxx]

{Pennsylvania, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2019}

(35)

You know who are the elite? You look at those jobs reports. We're the best in history unemployment for African Americans, best in history unemployment Hispanic Americans, best in history unemployment Asian Americans.

You're the elite. You're the elite.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x xxx 11.0 x x x x]

{Pennsylvania, 10.12.2019}

Inasmuch as the second pair of repetitions leads to a longer round of applause there are grounds for considering *phrasal repetition* as a reinforcement or prompt for audience response. Having cued once that applause is relevant but without receiving it, the second pair of repetitions serves to further emphasise the relevance of a response.

Different kinds of response may be relevant. In the previous examples the audience responds with applause. In the following example the audience responds with laughter,

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<sup>7</sup> A strong distinction needs to be made between Trump's speeches on formal occasions such as his inaugural speech or his State of the Union address to Congress or a speech at the United Nations, on the one hand, and his rally speeches to his own supporters. In the case of the former Trump is clearly reading from a prepared text. In the latter case of a rally speech the teleprompter merely serves as occasional back up and scaffold.

although note that the laughter itself seems related more to the mimicry of Bernie Sanders than to the exact repetition itself.

(36)

Bernie should be angry. Why isn't he angry? Crazy Bernie. He is so crazy. But, you know what, I saw him the other day on television. And he's ranting and raving. He's sitting behind a microphone, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this, blah, blah, blah," the hair's flying.  
He's going crazy. He's going crazy.

/[Laughter o o 4.0 o o ]

{Montana, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2018}

In many cases the repetition of a phrase relates directly to the point being made. In some cases, however, the onset of *phrasal repetition* represents some plane change from a developing point to direct address to the audience, as in the following.

(37)

What I said was perfect. But it screwed up the whole works because most guys would never do that. They didn't even know probably that we had it transcribed, professionally transcribed, word for word transcribed, so beautiful. Am I lucky I had it transcribed?  
Think of that. Think of that.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxxxxx 7.0]

{Pennsylvania, 10.12.2019}

In the following example Trump builds an anecdote around a reported conversation predicting an electoral victory for Trump, at the end of which he switches plane or footing to directly address the audience with a question ("should we give it a shot?") followed by a comment ("I'm only kidding") which itself becomes the basis for a phrasal repetition.

(38)

We have this idiot comedian who stands up, he's talking to a guest, right? He said, "You know he's going to win, don't you? You know it." The guy goes, "No, no. We're going to fight. We're going to fight." And they will. "No, no, no. You know he's going to win." Then he goes, "You know he's going to win. And you know he's never leaving, don't you? He's never leaving." At first I thought he was kidding. He's a whack job. He is totally serious. He honestly believes that.  
I don't know, should we give it a shot? Maybe we'll give it a shot.  
I'm only kidding. I'm only kidding.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxxx 6.0]

{Pennsylvania, 10.12.2019}

## 6.2 Reported speech and hypothetical exchanges

In switching between "Direct" and "Oblique Discourse", Trump moves from one plane of discourse to another, from an orientation directly towards the audience to an orientation towards a prepared script. Even in "Direct Discourse", however, Trump does not simply maintain a uniform plane but switches constantly from one momentary footing to another: he variously asks questions, makes assertions, reminds the audience of past slights and successes, and comments on events and propositions, all in a verbal performance sometimes likened to stream of consciousness.

(39)

But -- but think of it. So I beat the Republicans, governors, senators. I beat the Bush dynasty. Respectfully. I beat Hillary, who stole it from Bernie. Bernie should have won, but that's OK. They stole it. Superdelegates. How do you like superdelegates? But she's got superdelegates that were handed to her. Bernie should be angry. Why isn't he angry? Crazy Bernie. He is so crazy. But you know what? I saw him the other day on television.

{Montana, 06.09.2018}

Integral to this improvised dance from one footing to another, between one plane and another, is the use of an array of different voices. Political opponents, for instance, are mimicked and ridiculed, as in this continuation of example 39 above, relating to Bernie Sanders or the subsequent example (41) featuring Adam Schiff.

(40)

But, you know what?  
I saw him the other day on television.  
And he's ranting and raving. He's sitting behind a microphone,  
"I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this, blah, blah, blah." The  
hair's flying.  
He's going crazy. He's going crazy.

/[Laughter o o 4.0 o o]

{Montana, 06.09.2018}

(41)

little pencil-neck Adam Schiff

/[applause xxx BOOOO 8.0 OOOOO]

he's got the smallest thinnest neck I've ever seen

[Laughter o o O O 3.0 O Ooo]

he is not a long ball hitter (2.0)

but I saw him today

*[(DT adopts version of the voice of Adam Schiff)]*

-----  
"well we don't really know (.) uh there could still have been some ↘  
Russia collusion"

[Laughter applause o o o x x 5.0 x x]

{Grand Rapids, 28.03.2019}

When Trump takes on the voice of an opponent, as in these two examples (40 and 41), it can lead to *laughter*. But quotation can just as easily simply be used against them, leading to *booing*, as in the next example

(42)

But Cortez

- somebody said that's not her name. They said, "That's not her name, sir."

I said, "No, no. I don't have time to go with three different names. We'll

call her Cortez." Too much time -- takes too much time -

So Cortez also,

she said, "Essentially, Nazis are running concentration camps."

/[BOOO 4.5 OOOO]

{Greenville, N.C. 17.07.2019}

In the aside that leads into the quotation from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Trump embeds an exchange of reported speech between himself and unnamed officials. This is a common feature of his extempore monologues

(43)

You know when I meet dictators, and presidents, and kings, and queens, and prime ministers, they all come into that beautiful Oval Office. So beautiful, right? So respected. And the first thing they almost always say, "Sir, congratulations on your economy. We're trying to do the same thing." I said, "You won't be able to do it. You won't." They won't be able to. Let them give it a shot. But they all say, "Congratulations on the great job you've done with economy." But we've all done the great job. Not me. We've all done it. I've been your spokesman, and I've done a good job as spokesman. But they all say that.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x xxx 8.0 xxx x x]

{Pennsylvania, 10.12.2019}

(44)

But of the nine  
- eight of them were crying -  
And I looked at the ninth  
- crying out of happiness, because they're back. -  
I looked at the ninth guy, I said, "What's wrong with you? Why aren't you crying?"  
"I don't cry, sir."  
I said, "That's OK. That's OK."  
Eight out of nine were crying with happiness.

/[Laughter APPLAUSE o o xxxx 14.0 xxxx x x]

{Orlando, 18.06.2019}

Generally, when Trump features as a participant in his reported exchanges with miners, farmers, officials and visiting dignitaries, (as in examples 40 and 41 above) it is as a recipient of praise, thanks, admiration, congratulations or endorsement.

(45)

A year before I was going to run, Bobby Knight called. And they say, "Sir, do you know a Bobby Knight?" I said, "You mean the coach?" This is before I ran. And I said, "You're talking about the coach?" My secretary, great person, said, "Yes, sir, I think he said he was a coach." I pick up. I said, "Hello." He goes, "Trump, this is Bobby Knight, and you got to run for president. Our country needs you." And I said "That's Bobby Knight. That's Bobby Knight." Right? That's Bobby Knight.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x x xxxxx 12.0 xxxxx x x]

{Orlando, 18.06.2019}

### 6.3 Favourable reference to us

Otherwise a constant theme of Trump's "Direct Discourse" with his audience consists of (in Atkinson's terms) 'favourable references to us' or -- more specifically -- to Trump himself, either explicitly or implicitly. Examples 32 and 33 above ("you're the elite") ("we're the best in history.."), 35 ("what I said was perfect"), and 41 ("But we've all done the great job. Not me. We've all done it. I've been your spokesman, and I've done a good job as spokesman.") all include explicitly favourable references to the audience and/or himself. And generally

most of the audience responses that consist of applause with sustained waves of clapping and cheering are preceded by favourable references to Trump or his supporters, as can be seen in the following examples. Indeed

(46)

And according to the polls, I won every single debate, Republican and against Hillary.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxxx 6.0 xxxx]

{Greenville, N.C. 17.07.2019}

(47)

OK, we're in this incredible state, North Carolina. You have your best economy that you've ever had. Forget the country for a second. You have the best economy you've ever had.

You have your best unemployment numbers. You have the most people working than at any time in the history of your state. You have your best black unemployment numbers, best Hispanic unemployment numbers, best women unemployment numbers, best Asian unemployment numbers.

OK. OK. Alright.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x XXXX 12.0 XXXxx x]

{Greenville, N.C. 17.07.2019}

(48)

our military was depleted. It was depleted. It was in bad shape. We had fighter jets that were 35 years old. We had planes that were 60 years... You heard where the father flew them, the grandfather flew them, and now the young son comes in. We've got the best equipment in the world now. Spent two and a half trillion dollars, made in the USA. Two and a half trillion. We will shortly. That'll be all finished. We're going to have the greatest... Now we have the best planes. We're going to have the best ships. We're building a lot of ships now.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x XXX 7.0 XXxxx ]

{Battle Creek, Michigan, 18.12.2019}

(49)

But what we're doing has been an incredible thing. It's an incredible thing. When I'm on the debate stage with one of these characters, and they try and say negative stuff, I'll just say, "Well, here's the story. In the history of our country, this group is doing the best, and that group is doing the best, and the women are doing the best, and everybody's doing. And frankly, you know what it is? The whole country's doing the best. Okay? The whole country is doing the best."

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping x x XXXX 9.0 XXXxx x]

{Battle Creek, Michigan, 18.12.2019}

## 6.4 Unfavourable references to them

If *favourable references to us* are met frequently with applause, then -- hardly surprisingly -- *unfavourable references to them* are mostly met with *boos*. A common target for negative comment is the 'fake media'

(50)

The fake news doesn't ever want to put that stuff on.

/[B00000 9.0 00000]

They don't want to talk about it. They don't ever want to put it on. They're a bunch of fakers.

But perhaps the most obvious and common target for *booing* are Democrats in general.

(51)

If Democrats get control, they will raise your taxes, flood your streets with criminal aliens, weaken our military, outlaw private health insurance, and replace freedom with socialism.

/[B00000 4.0 00000]

{Mississippi 02.10.2018}

(52)

In a short period of time

-- of course, I'll be doing lots of vetoes, just so don't worry too much -- they (=Democrats) will turn America into Venezuela.

How's that working out?

/[B00000 5.0 00000]

{Mississippi 02.10.2018}

The unfavourable references to Democrats in general may be narrowed to individual specific Democratic opponents.

(53)

This guy (=opponent of nomination of Kavanaugh to Supreme Court) lied about his service. He didn't just say, "Gee, I was in the service." No. He said, "I was in the Marines. Da Nang Province. Soldiers dying left and right as we battled up the hill." This went on for 15 years when he was the attorney general of Connecticut. I thought he was a Great War hero. And then it turned out he was never in Vietnam.

/[B00000 6.0 00000]

{Mississippi 02.10.2018}

Sometimes it is sufficient for Trump simply to name a Democratic opponent in order to elicit a strong response from the audience. In the first part of the following example (60) the Democrats in general are considered to have gone to the far left. Then Trump names Representative Omar:

(54)

We've got all the enthusiasm, they're fighting each other. They've gone so far left. Nobody wants to even think about it. So Representative Omar

/[B00000 5.0 00000]

blamed the United States for the terrorist attacks on our country, saying that terrorism is a reaction to our involvement in other people's affairs.

/[B0000 3.0 000]

{Greenville, N.C. 17.07.2019}

This particular extract becomes part of a sequence in which other Democratic congresswomen are mentioned by name

(55)

So, that's Omar, that's Omar. And by the way, many other things, all you have to do is press the right button on your beautiful screen and you'll see thing of -- you didn't hear this over the last two days, or did you hear anybody talk about that? Her colleague, Representative Rashida Tlaib

/[B00000 5.0 00000]

agreed with Omar's characterization of 9/11 and said that members of Congress who support Israel forgot what country they represent.

....

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

/[BOOOO 9.0 OOOOO]

{Greenville, N.C. 17.07.2019}

(56)

So Cortez also, she said,

"Essentially, Nazis are running concentration camps."

/[BOOO 4.5 OOOO]

{Greenville, N.C. 17.07.2019}

## 6.5 Projecting a name

As we have seen, overall the repertoire of audience responses is fundamentally structured in binary terms of approval/disapproval, affiliation/disaffiliation, heroes and villains, friends and enemies. Simple references to names can be easily be integrated into this binary structure. And generally the process of introducing a figure by name is often guaranteed to lead to an audience response – either booing or cheering applause. We have already seen examples of *booing* responses above. But just as names such as Adam Schiff, Nancy Pelosi, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez figure in a known pantheon of disreputables for Trump's audience, many of his speeches also draw on sequences in which prominent local Republicans are introduced to the audience to waves of positive applause.

(57)

But we're joined tonight by many terrific Republican leaders. Your Michigan House Speaker, Lee Chatfield. Where's Lee? Lee, come up if you want. Come on, what the hell, we have nothing else to do. Should we get him up? Yes. Come up Lee, come up Lee, get up here.  
Come on up, Lee.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxXXXXX 10.0 XXXXXx x]

Republican Party Chairwoman, Ronna McDaniel,  
who I spoke to.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping xxx 6.0 xxx ]

{Battle Creek, Michigan, 18.12.2019}

(58)

And the bottom line on the end of her story, so when I won I said, "Who's going to head up the RNC?" I said, "I got to get that woman from Michigan." Remember they were all saying, "You can't win Michigan"? Now we're going to win it by so much, you better remember all those. Every time a car plant opens, please think about Trump. Come on up here, Lee. Michigan GOP Chairwoman, Laura Cox. Thank you.

/[APPLAUSE cheering clapping xXXXX 13.0 XXXXXxxx x]

{Battle Creek, Michigan, 18.12.2019}

## 7.0 Conclusions

Studies of political rhetoric (e.g., Martin, J. 2014; Charteris-Black, J. 2014; Leith, D. and Myerson, 1989 ) tend to focus on specific formal properties of texts and their persuasive power, in recognition of the fact that political processes – especially campaigning - are performed in, by, and through words. In this article I likewise start from the basis that texts have properties that are capable of close analysis and that close analysis can cast light on the political process. However, in addressing Trump's rally speeches I try and situate the

formal properties of texts within the context of the whole interactive communicative event of which they form a part. For, while Trump undoubtedly takes centre stage as the main speaker at each of his rallies, these events are much larger than Trump himself and the words he uses. They are, indeed, by any measure, large scale occasions in which the audience plays a role that might be considered as significant as that of the speaker. As a cast of thousands, in unison, they laugh, cheer, boo, gesticulate, applaud and make their presence felt – to each other and to Trump – in a range of complex ways.

For this reason, it is important for any account of Trump's rally speeches to treat them as more than text, rhetoric and linguistic form. Drawing on the tradition of work that began with Atkinson's study of applause (1984) and which was developed further by Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) and then critically extended by Bull (2006, 2016), this article seeks to integrate the text of the Trump's speeches with a range of audience responses. In doing so it extends that tradition by considering not just applause – or clapping – but the whole range of audience responses, embracing a variety of behaviour including chanting, laughter, gesture, and booing.

For as a communicative event, a Trump rally is much more than two strands of behaviour, a speech by Trump and reactions by an audience. The two strands of behaviour exist not separately with occasional overlap, but in continuous and intimate interconnection. A Trump rally is a communicative event to which both Trump and his audience contribute in different ways but in equal measure, in which the different roles of speaker and audience are interdependent and at times may become blurred. In this way any attempt to make sense of a Trump rally speech by analysing it as a set of ideologies, or metaphors, or a set of arguments or propositions with a truth value will somehow miss the point. For at the core of Trump's rallies lies experience rather than argument, authenticity rather than truth (Montgomery, 2017). They are better described as a public conversation in which a shifting set of alignments are performatively - but collectively - realised in action, gesture, and word - one in which Trump may catch and set the mood of the occasion, but in which the audience themselves are performers for each other – and for Trump himself.

Indeed, as a communicative event they offer a special kind of experience only to be gained by 'being there'. It is an experience of togetherness, of a shared structure of feeling, of victimhood, where participants are finally bound together in acts of solidarity which transcend the sense of being an excluded minority ('strangers in their own land' to quote Hochschild, 2016) and where for an hour or two in the space of the rally they can enjoy acting as an overlooked majority, united at last in celebration, humour, laughter, love and hate. This experience far outweighs the privatised politics of the newspaper page, of the living room television debate, or of the solitary keyboard.

As an experience it is important to recognise its fundamentally social (and even ritual) character. Trump's speeches, however unscripted and extemporised, often overlap with

each other in terms of their content: he will celebrate the role played by the locality in delivering his election victory; he will celebrate the great turn-out at all his rallies; he will celebrate his achievements since taking office; he will excoriate the main stream media (“fake news”) and his political enemies; he will introduce political allies to his audience. As such his speeches do not individually break new ground. Instead they offer audiences the opportunity to share, by their presence, in the rituals of the occasion. But these are nothing if not collectively produced. The repertoire of audience response – and its performance – makes manifest members’ knowledge about how to behave appropriately in public at these communicative events: who to boo, why, and for how long; what counts as laughable; what to chant, when and for how long; what is the right gesture to accompany a particular vocalisation.

This is not so much politics as policy, or programme, or party, but politics as live performance (Higgins, 2019), as “entertainment, gesture and spectacle” (Hall et. al. 2016), at an event which is more akin to a sporting occasion, a music festival, or as Hall et. al. point out, drawing tellingly on Bakhtin (1984), a Rabelaisian carnival with all the connotations of lewdness and comedic vulgarity. At the same time, the analogy with sport or popular music is instructive. For in an era when digital and social media play such an important role in creating audiences for sport or music, the live event, nonetheless, remains absolutely crucial and central to each domain. Just so in politics, when the role of social media – especially in the case of Trump – is credited with widescale and decisive interventions, Trump by accident or design, has hit upon a strategy to communicate and consolidate his relationship with his base that revives the significance of the live event.

Does the live event carry its own aura? What is the special appeal of liveness? In part it is a question of the unrepeatability of the live event, its uniqueness, the uncertainty of the unfolding moment, and a consequent element of risk. But it is also the sense of occasion in which experience is public rather than private, collective and shared in the moment, rather than individual. In a discussion of live music, Frith (2007) has commented as follows:

Live musical performance matters, then, for two reasons. On the one hand, it is a public celebration of musical commitment, a deeply pleasurable event at which our understanding of ourselves through music is socially recognised. On the other hand, it is a site in which to explore—for ourselves—how performance works.

The comment could easily be recast to apply to Trump on the stump and his audience: live political performance matters for two reasons. On the one hand, it is a public celebration of political commitment, a deeply pleasurable event for those involved, at which the audience’s understanding of itself through politics is socially recognised. On the other hand, it is a site in which to explore — for ourselves — how performance works.

At the heart of Trump’s continuing survival and success as a politician is his co-performance on stage with, as much as in front of, large audiences of supporters. Those who wish to

offer an alternative and better future will need to find a way to match or counter these quintessentially populist performances.

### **Afterword, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

Most of the work on this article took place in the latter half of 2019, with the writing of it finished by the end of February, 2020. At that time there was just one death from Covid-19 in the US. But by mid-March, as the epidemic gathered pace, the US C.D.C was recommending no public gatherings of 50 or more, and Trump has had to suspend his campaign rallies – the last being held on Monday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>. It remains to be seen how adversely Trump’s campaign for re-election in November 2020 will be affected by events. The basic thrust of this article would suggest a strongly negative effect. Trump certainly thinks so. As he told the New York Post, he misses the rallies:

I hope we’re going to be able to get the rallies back before the election. I actually think it’s very important. I think that would be a big — a big disadvantage to me if we didn’t, if we couldn’t have the rallies back. People are wanting the rallies. They want to have them so badly. They were informative but they were fun.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> New York Post, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2020. <https://nypost.com/2020/05/05/trump-says-coronavirus-briefings-will-return-blasts-cbs-news/>

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Hazadiah Mohamad Dahan

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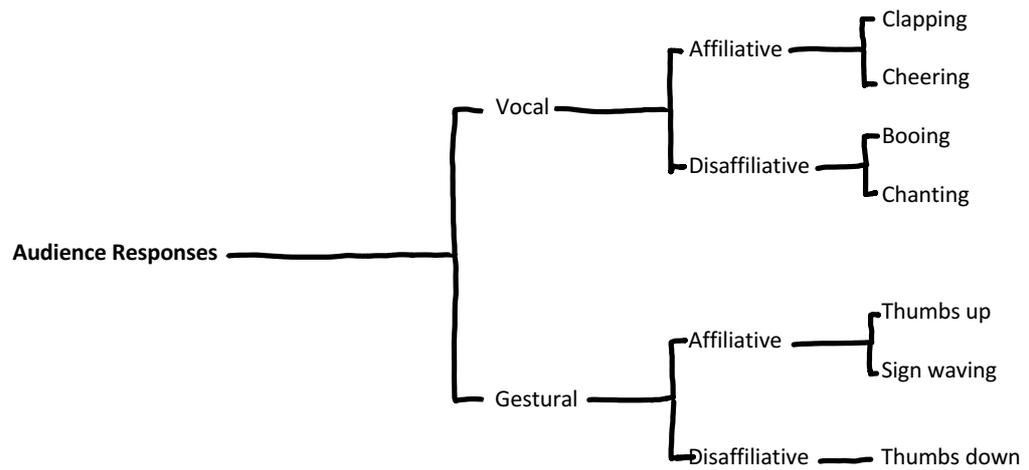


Figure One: Semantic Network for Audience Responses

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