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26 травня 2026 

**VERBAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SCANDAL SCENARIO IN
AMERICAN POLITICAL MEDIA DISCOURSE**

MA Paper

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26, May 2026, Minutes 5

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Kyiv 2026

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Abstract

The study examines scandalous utterances in American political discourse in English between 2020 and 2026. Its aim is to show how political utterances acquire scandalous force in media circulation and how they change as they move from the speaker to media representation. The working hypothesis posits that scandalous utterances function as structurally embedded discursive acts whose scandal-generating properties emerge at the intersection of linguistic organisation, media framing and platform dynamics. The empirical material comprises primary utterances by Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Greene, JD Vance, Pete Hegseth and Lauren Boebert, alongside their representations in mainstream, right-wing and platform-level media. The methodological framework integrates Critical Discourse Analysis, framing theory, speech act theory, politeness theory, conceptual metaphor theory, mediatization studies and the theory of theme-generating concepts. The analysis proceeds in four stages: identification of theme-generating concepts; scenario typology; three-level linguistic analysis; and comparison of original and mediated utterances. The findings show that scandalous force emerges through the interaction between linguistic form and circulation, with decontextualisation and recontextualisation as the primary mechanisms of scandal construction.

Keywords: political scandal, media discourse, framing, decontextualisation, political rhetoric.

Introduction

This study deals with scandalous utterances in contemporary American political discourse in English. The starting point is straightforward: between 2020 and 2026, statements that would once have been treated as serious breaches of acceptable speech became routine, and in many cases deliberate, parts of mainstream political communication. That shift is what makes the topic worth examining linguistically. Scandalous speech today is not an exception to the rules of political language but, increasingly, a way that political language operates. The question is how this works at the level of words.

The object of the study is scandalous utterances in English-language American political discourse from 2020 to 2026, taken both in their original form and in the way the media reproduce them. The subject is narrower: the linguo-stylistic, linguo-rhetorical and linguo-pragmatic features of these utterances, and the discursive mechanisms that turn an ordinary remark into something that carries scandalous force.

The working hypothesis is that no single layer of analysis explains why a statement becomes a scandal. A provocative utterance can vanish without media uptake, while a fairly mild one can become explosive once it is reframed and put into wider circulation. Three things, taken together, produce the effect: how the utterance is built linguistically, how the media frame it, and what happens to it on the platforms where it spreads. The study treats these three factors as interdependent rather than additive.

The work aims to identify the linguistic, rhetorical and pragmatic mechanisms that produce scandalous force, and to describe how an utterance changes when it travels from the speaker to media coverage. Several tasks follow from this. The first is to set out the theoretical foundations of political scandal as a linguo-social, linguo-psychological and linguo-discursive phenomenon. The second is to assemble a

methodological framework that combines the relevant linguistic and discursive theories. The third is to identify the theme-generating concepts that consistently trigger controversy in the political discourse of the Trump era. The fourth is to build a typology of scandalous scenarios that emerge from the interaction between political utterances and their media representations. The fifth is to analyse the linguo-stylistic, linguo-rhetorical and linguo-pragmatic features of the utterances themselves and to compare them with what happens in their mediated versions.

The empirical material has four layers. The first is primary political utterances: speeches, rally addresses, social media posts on X (formerly Twitter) and Truth Social, debate exchanges and statements in Congress, drawn from Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Greene, JD Vance, Pete Hegseth and Lauren Boebert. The second is mainstream media coverage: The New York Times, Reuters, Politico and The Guardian. The third is right-wing and alternative media: Fox News, Breitbart and Truth Social feeds. The fourth is platform-level discourse, where the analysis follows user reactions, memes, quote-tweets and short video reactions on X, TikTok and Reddit, used selectively rather than systematically. Cases were chosen for analytical value, not for completeness of coverage. Where an example only repeated something already documented, it was left out.

The methodological framework is intentionally pluralistic. Each component does a specific job. Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2021) sets the general orientation and ties scandalous utterances to the broader fight over legitimacy. Framing theory (Entman, 1993; Lakoff, 2004) explains how theme-generating concepts work cognitively and why the same utterance reads differently in different outlets. Speech act theory and Gricean pragmatics (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Grice, 1975) provide the vocabulary for the linguo-pragmatic part of the analysis. Politeness theory and the concept of face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967) deal with face-threatening acts in digital settings. Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Charteris-Black, 2006) covers metaphors such as POLITICS IS WAR and POLITICS IS BUSINESS. Mediatization and platform studies (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Bucher, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011) account for the dynamics of digital circulation. The theory of theme-generating concepts (Prykhodko, 2008) gives the conceptual tool for spotting the discursive triggers of scandalisation. The analytical procedure runs in four stages: identifying theme-generating concepts (MIGRANTS, TARIFFS, FAKE NEWS, DEEP STATE, CHINA, MAGA), building a typology of scandalous scenarios, three-level linguistic analysis applied both to the original utterances and to their mediated versions, and comparative analysis along four dimensions: lexical salience, modality, visual framing and temporal placement.

The novelty of the work has three sides. It develops the concept of theme-generating concepts (Prykhodko, 2008) on new material, namely American political scandal discourse from 2016 to 2026. It pairs the three-level linguistic analysis with a comparative description of original and mediated discourse, so that the two are read against each other rather than separately. And it identifies specific discursive

mechanisms through which scandals are produced and normalised in the post-2020 media environment.

The structure of the work follows the order of the tasks. Chapter 1 sets the theoretical foundations of political scandal research. Chapter 2 lays out the methodological framework. Chapter 3 identifies the theme-generating concepts and builds the typology of scandalous scenarios. Chapter 4 applies the three-level analysis to the empirical material. The General Conclusions bring the findings together and indicate where further research could go.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Background of Political Scandal Research

1.1. SCANDAL as a Linguo-Social Interaction

The basic premise of contemporary studies is that the mere violation of a norm does not, in itself, create a scandal; it arises only when it is made public and discussed. For example, Zulli (2020) refers to political scandals as "central communicative events" and argues that "a scandal is not merely something that is revealed but also something that is shown, reported, staged and kept alive day after day" (p. 5220). The implication is that scandals draw their social meaning from communicative work rather than from the violation as such. Allern and von Sikorski (2018) define political scandals as "real or conjectured norm violations of political actors or institutions that are repeatedly reported on and framed by the news media and other actors as scandalous." This shifts attention to framing and repetition. Lopes, Ferreira, and Ferreira (2025, p. 85) point to the same pattern: without media exposure, events rarely gain broader attention or become part of public debate. According to Thompson (2000), scandals occur when previously hidden actions become publicly known; for those involved, this damages reputations and undermines legitimacy in the media-driven public sphere. Scandal is not reducible to violation; it is tied to symbolic power.

Because "scandal" is often used in everyday language to describe almost any negative situation, it is worth drawing some boundaries. Although conflict typically involves a clash of goals or interests, it often remains limited to a specific context and does not necessarily result in broader moral condemnation (Burton, 1990). Similarly, disputes tend to stay within a local context and fade relatively quickly; even when they are highly intense, they rarely sustain the level of public attention that is characteristic of scandals. As Ekström and Johansson (2008, p. 61) note, "without media coverage, most scandals would not exist as scandals." Pozner and Hannigan (2023) put it slightly differently: wrongdoing alone does not constitute a scandal; a scandal takes shape when attention gathers and events start to be seen as violations.

A crisis usually refers to a disruption that threatens the stability of a system, while a scandal is tied to a perceived violation attributed to a specific actor (Coombs, 2007). A disruption becomes a scandal only when it is publicly framed as a moral issue and begins to carry reputational consequences.

A scandal emerges from the interaction of different actors and their linguistic actions. This makes it possible to identify their functions, strategies, and positions in the discourse. This implies a triadic configuration in which it is the very presence of the third element, namely the public, that distinguishes a scandal from a private conflict. The accuser, who may be journalists or political opponents, interprets the action in question as a breach of social norms, relying on evidence or moral judgements, and presents it as an act of public exposure that damages the other party's reputation. The accused tries to minimise this reputational damage. Ilas (2025) characterises corporate apologies as "discursive performances" (p. 6) shaped by institutional expectations rather than transparent statements of intent; they include justification, apology, minimisation, or counter-accusation, each a means of communicative positioning. SCCT, although developed within the framework of crisis communication theory, emphasises that responses vary depending on the degree of acceptance of guilt and the perceived level of responsibility. Apology opens the possibility of atonement but necessitates the symbolic destruction of the previous identity, a signalling process that directly influences the formation of the other party's image in the eyes of the public. In today's digital environment, the third party is not merely a recipient of information (Coombs, 2007): as Zulli (2020) notes, interactivity allows people to actively participate in constructing and disseminating the narrative of the scandal, and its intensity is determined by how different communities morally code the event, which means that a scandal may develop unevenly across platforms (Brady et al., 2021).

The linguistic aspect of scandal lies in analysing how the event acquires moral significance through evaluative framing and how the participants in communication position themselves in relation to the assigned responsibility. Lexical units such as "betrayal", "corruption", "hypocrisy", or "concealment" do not simply describe an action but classify it and position it in a moral order. Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection of aspects of reality in such a way as to promote certain definitions of the problem, causal interpretations, and moral evaluations (p. 52). The communicative role and modal markers of the speaker are also important: accusers tend to be epistemically confident and construct their statements as obvious violations by the other party, whereas the accused seek to reduce their responsibility by using strategic ambiguity. Linguistic choices shape the audience's trust, which may perceive this reaction as sincerity or as evasiveness; a scandal thereby emerges as a discursive construction in which the language of institutions and the audience jointly give an event the status of public significance.

1.2. Linguo-Psychological Foundations of Conflict Communication

Humans certainly display aggression, just like other species, but verbal disputes are often not linked to an immediate physical threat, last considerably longer, and revolve around abstract issues such as reputation or moral legitimacy. Conflict communication, therefore, is not merely a matter of instinct. It depends, above all, on interpretation. The basic premise here is Theory of Mind: the ability to

attribute beliefs, intentions and mental states to others, whilst recognising that these may differ from one's own (Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Tomasello, 2014). Many conflicts arise not so much because of the events themselves, but because of the significance attributed to them. A remark interpreted as a sign of disrespect, or silence interpreted as avoidance, can become a source of conflict even in the absence of direct hostile actions. In this sense, the conflict is meta-representational in nature and concerns interpretations of interpretations rather than the events themselves.

Mercier and Sperber (2017) describe how people reason in nested forms ("I know that you know that I know"), and in public disputes this kind of recursive mind-reading often produces multiple interpretations layered on top of each other. Thus, recursive 'mind-reading' functions as a discursive mechanism rather than merely a cognitive ability, thereby reinforcing suspicions and exacerbating conflicts in public communication. This dynamic can be linked to recursive models of mentalisation (Baron-Cohen, 1995), whilst its stabilisation in discourse reflects the inferential nature of communication described in relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Language-based conflict requires abstraction and logical structuring (Fitch, 2020), as disputes often concern abstract concepts such as legitimacy, morality or ideological principles, which allows the conflict to become detached from a specific situation and to persist longer than the event that triggered it. Threats to identity or social standing rarely leave people unaffected; they usually sharpen reactions, especially when others are watching. In line with Lisa Feldman Barrett's (2020) account, the brain does not passively register such moments but constructs them through prediction, drawing on experience to generate anger, fear, or resentment, and these emotional states are persistent. What starts as a brief irritation can become something more lasting, especially when unclear behaviour is read as intentional harm.

Research on social pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003) demonstrates that the experience of social rejection activates neural systems also involved in physical pain. Subsequent studies have extended this finding to related experiences such as public criticism and reputational damage (Eisenberger, 2012). Therefore, a scandal is understood not merely as a discursive event, but as a tangible form of social threat capable of provoking a lasting emotional reaction. There is a brief but significant time lag between the initial affective reaction and the subsequent verbal response, during which this reaction can be moderated, redirected or intensified, depending on what is at stake for the speaker's public image.

In political scandals, media repetition fixes certain interpretations in place. Fazio et al. (2015) argue that "repeated statements are easier to process and are therefore perceived as more truthful" (p. 993); familiarity is misread as accuracy rather than mere repetition. Repetition strengthens connections in memory (Kunda & Thagard, 1996), which makes repeated claims feel more convincing over time (Unkelbach & Rom, 2017). In practice, this means that familiarity can be mistaken for truth. Importantly, this effect does not disappear even when people are aware of it or try to resist it (Fazio et al., 2015).

A central mechanism in this dynamic is face management: participants calibrate their statements to maintain or renegotiate their relational positioning. The desire to preserve a positive image of oneself and others is captured in the concept of face proposed by Erving Goffman: face is defined as a social value based on how others perceive a person's behaviour during contact. In media discourse about scandals, a person is in "wrong face" when information appears around their social value that is incompatible with the behaviour they have maintained (Goffman, 1967). According to Luc Boltanski, when a private transgression is exposed, and a person loses face, it marks the beginning of a scandal (Boltanski, 2012). Some participants, however, have more opportunities to influence the situation: institutional status and access to public platforms can shape which interpretation of events becomes dominant in the public sphere (Wodak & Meyer, 2021), and control over the communication frame influences the distribution of responsibility, the formation of moral judgements, and the audience's interpretation of causes. As R. Entman notes, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Metaphors also play an important role in political and media discourse, enabling indirect evaluation of events and opponents' positions: as Charteris-Black (2006) observes, "modern political discourse is thoroughly permeated with metaphor" (p. 1). Conflict metaphors, especially those of struggle and battle, are a recurring feature, with Thatcher's rhetoric being a classic example of politics framed as warfare, and they also perform a strategic function by condensing into sound bites that circulate widely and reinforce the image of a political actor. Most scandals, then, are associated with symbolic violations, emotional mobilisation, narrative framing, and competition to solidify one's own interpretation of events in the public space, forming a structured interaction based on linguistic organisation as well as cognitive abilities and culturally accepted norms.

1.3. SCANDAL as Discursive Activity

Contemporary media studies increasingly view a scandal as a process unfolding within public communication, rather than as a clearly defined event. A breach of the norm does not carry social significance; this arises when the situation becomes visible, draws in various participants, and begins to circulate within the media landscape. At this point, an interpretation takes shape, often even before an established version of events emerges. Early interpretations usually persist even after they are subsequently challenged, making the timing of their emergence a crucial factor. Media select details, organise them into narratives, and sustain attention around specific aspects of a case, while other elements gradually disappear from discussion. What results is not a neutral reflection of events but a structured version of them that already carries interpretive weight.

Åkerlund (2025) argues that political scandal is not a pre-existing phenomenon but is co-constructed through communicative interaction between political actors, journalists, and audiences, and is shaped by moral emotions such as

outrage, indignation, and betrayal. Mendoza (2025) also views scandal as performative: competing participants stage claims to truth and legitimacy, such that 'trust is not simply lost or regained; it is staged, felt, and fought over'. In the US context, new disputes are usually interpreted immediately through the prism of previous scandals, so a comparative approach arises almost automatically. In such circumstances, responses rarely conclude an exchange; instead, they are reintroduced into the discussion, reinterpreted and used in new interpretations.

Those at the centre of a scandal usually avoid giving a direct answer. Their reactions serve not so much as a defence as an attempt to control the significance of the event, combining damage control with managing how the situation will be interpreted. Denial usually comes first, but it rarely takes the form of a simple denial, as in practice it often looks like a selective distortion of reality. Something similar can be observed in George Santos's initial reactions following media exposés regarding fabricated elements of his CV and biography: he admitted to minor inaccuracies but continued to treat more serious allegations as exaggerated. This allowed him to appear responsive without addressing the substance of the scandal, and to shift attention from the bigger picture to a series of isolated inaccuracies.

That kind of response does not hold for long. As more information comes out, outright denial becomes harder to maintain, and the emphasis begins to shift: the claims are not rejected anymore, they are recast. In the disputes around Donald Trump and the handling of classified documents, this shift shows up quite clearly. References to presidential authority and declassification start to dominate the discussion, pulling it away from legal responsibility and into a more contested, political reading. At the same time, defence can turn outward: responsibility is displaced, and the actor positions themselves as a target rather than a source of the problem. This is particularly clear in the repeated use of phrases such as "witch hunt" or "political persecution" in the communication of Donald Trump, including posts on Truth Social, where the focus moves away from the initial issue and toward claims of institutional bias. The accusation does not disappear; it is absorbed into a different narrative.

The scandal arises not from the facts themselves, but from the way in which they are framed. This is clear from the reaction to the events of 6 January 2021 at the Capitol: within the very first few hours, two dominant narratives had emerged in parallel. In the media, predominantly of a liberal orientation, terms such as 'unrest', 'chaos' and 'protests turned violent' quickly gave way to phrases such as 'insurrection', 'attack on the Capitol' and 'threat to democratic institutions'. In the other section, primarily on the right, the softer phrasing persisted longer and was later joined by the alternative frame of "legitimate political discourse", enshrined in a resolution by the Republican National Committee in February 2022. The way the same image of the crowd at the Capitol was described determined how it was subsequently discussed in the public sphere. This moral weight requires substantiation that comes from evidence and, no less importantly, from how it is presented: during the hearings on 6 January, video recordings, testimonies, and official documents were combined in such a way as to gradually reinforce a single

line of interpretation, which became difficult to challenge not because alternative interpretations had disappeared but because they became harder to sustain as details accumulated.

When neither denial nor justification fully holds, the focus often shifts again. The issue is not dismissed outright but gradually reduced in scale through comparisons that fold the scandal into a broader field of "similar cases". Sometimes the move is even more direct: attention is pulled elsewhere through new topics and parallel controversies. Defensive communication, in this sense, does not simply respond to a scandal. It actively reshapes the conditions under which the scandal is interpreted, and at times it even changes what the scandal is about. This dynamic is linked to a broader pattern described in the literature on scandalisation and normalisation: repeated public exposure to breaches of norms gradually diminishes the perceived seriousness of the breaches themselves. Wodak (2021) calls this 'shameless normalisation', describing a process in which traditional rules of political culture are undermined by constant provocations that, once disseminated through the media, settle into the familiar framework. Rottinghaus's (2023) empirical analysis of scandals from Watergate to 2021 confirms this dynamic from another angle: in a polarised political era, scandals are weathered with fewer losses than before, indicating a shift in the very function of scandal in political life. The question of legitimacy fits into this system more subtly but is no less significant: accusations carry weight when they are framed by procedural form, expert knowledge or institutional authority. Congressional investigations are built precisely on this effect, presenting themselves as fact-finding exercises even when their political consequences are obvious.

Conclusions to Chapter 1

Chapter 1 approached scandal as a multi-layered discursive phenomenon that unfolds across the linguo-social, linguo-psychological, and linguo-discursive levels simultaneously. The value of this framing is not merely taxonomic: it grounds the claim that scandal is not revealed but produced, and that its production depends on sustained communicative work across all three levels.

At the social level, scandal does not emerge as a mechanical reaction to a violation of norms, but rather as the outcome of a triadic interaction between the accuser, the accused, and the public, where the moral weight of the event is produced through active framing (Entman, 1993). A broader view of reactive behaviour comes from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007): it describes how each side positions itself depending on the level of responsibility it is willing to accept.

The cognitive side of the question turned out to be no less important. Here Theory of Mind (Tomasello, 2014) and the notion of recursive mind-reading (Mercier & Sperber, 2017) proved particularly useful, since they explain why a scandal can outlast the event that triggered it. These mechanisms, reinforced by the constructed nature of emotions (Barrett, 2020) and the social pain effect

(Eisenberger et al., 2003), help explain both the temporal persistence of scandal and its capacity for self-reproduction through retelling and reinterpretation. Particular importance is attached to Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which captures the reputational vulnerability of participants, as well as to the illusory truth effect (Fazio et al., 2015), demonstrating how repetition stabilises scandal-related formulations in public consciousness.

At the discursive level, scandal unfolds as a dynamic interplay of strategies that range from denial to reframing, minimisation, counter-accusation, and diversion. Alongside these, there operate the mechanisms of those who narrate the scandal: selection of quotations, narrative construction, accumulation of evidence, and appeals to institutional legitimacy. These strategies do not form a linear sequence; rather, they overlap, reinforce one another, and derive their effectiveness from the context of mass media circulation.

Chapter 2. Methodology of the Research

2.1. Material and Scope of the Study

The empirical basis of the study covers English-language political discourse from 2020 to 2026, with a focus on the period from 2022 to 2026. This timeframe demonstrates how the patterns established during Donald Trump's first term are not only becoming entrenched but are also intensifying. This concerns the impact of the 2022 mid-term elections, the 2024 presidential campaign and the communication environment of the second administration.

The empirical corpus is organised into four interrelated categories of source material. The first encompasses primary political statements, including speeches, rally addresses, press briefings, social media posts, primarily on X/Twitter and Truth Social, debate interventions, and statements in Congress, produced by Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Greene, JD Vance, Pete Hegseth, and Lauren Boebert. These actors were selected for their discursive significance, given their substantial contribution to the formation of the scandalisation patterns under analysis, and for the availability of their statements in an open and verifiable form.

The New York Times, Reuters, Politico and The Guardian constitute the second category, representing the mainstream media. The third category covers representations in right-wing conservative and alternative media, including Fox News, Breitbart and Truth Social feeds. This combination of left- and right-leaning sources is methodologically significant, as the study does not treat media framing as a secondary context but rather as one of the primary objects of analysis. In the context of the scandal, a comparative framework requires systematic coverage of the entire ideological spectrum. The fourth category includes discourse at the platform level, specifically user reactions, the spread of memes, quote-tweets and short video reactions sourced from X, TikTok and Reddit, which are used selectively to track how statements spread beyond their original context.

The study does not pursue exhaustive corpus coverage of these sources. A conceptual rather than corpus-based approach was adopted deliberately, for reasons outlined in 2.2. The selection of specific statements and images in the media was based on the principle of theoretical richness. If the examples merely illustrated patterns already identified and did not add a new analytical dimension to the analysis of the material, they were excluded. This procedure focuses on the depth of analysis rather than the breadth of coverage, which is appropriate as the study focuses on discursive mechanisms rather than frequency indicators.

All primary sources are in English. No translation was performed, and the study does not extend to non-Anglophone media coverage of the same events, a limitation acknowledged in the General Conclusions.

2.2. Theoretical-Methodological Framework

The study is based on a combination of interrelated theoretical models, a necessity dictated by the multi-layered nature of the subject under analysis. The

discourse of political scandals operates at the level of utterances, rhetorical organisation, pragmatic functions and media dissemination. Since no single model covers all these aspects, the theoretical and methodological framework developed is deliberately pluralistic, but not eclectic, as each model is assigned a specific analytical role.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the overarching orientation of the study. In the formulation of van Dijk (2001, p. 352), CDA is concerned with "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." This orientation is directly relevant to the analysis of scandalous political utterances, which function not merely as communicative events but as instruments for the construction and contestation of legitimacy, authority, and moral authority.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1995; 2001) encompasses text, discursive practice and social practice, and sets out the sequence of analysis at each level of inquiry. Textual analysis identifies the linguistic features of controversial statements (lexical choice, metaphor, syntactic reduction, type of speech act). Discursive practice analyses how texts are produced, disseminated and consumed, paying particular attention to the role of platform architecture and editorial selection. Social practice analyses the findings within the broader context of the dynamics of political polarisation, mediatisation and disputes over legitimacy in American politics since 2020.

Wodak's (2021) discourse-historical approach complements Fairclough's (1995) conceptual model by highlighting the historical roots of discursive strategies. In contemporary American political rhetoric, these forms, in particular dehumanising labels, metaphors of exclusion, and conspiracy frames, acquire rhetorical force precisely because of their historical roots. Wodak's concept of the "shameless normalisation" of previously unsayable language (2021, p. 12) is particularly relevant to the analysis of the escalation patterns documented in Chapter 4.

Framing Theory

Entman's (1993, p. 52) definition of framing, "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation," functions as both a theoretical concept and an analytical procedure in this study. At the level of political utterances, framing analysis identifies how theme-generating concepts (MIGRANTS, TARIFFS, FAKE NEWS) activate interpretive schemas. In terms of media representations, this framework points out how the same statement is taken differently by media outlets with different political leanings.

Lakoff's (2014) account of frames as mental structures that shape perception prior to conscious evaluation provides the cognitive dimension of this analysis.

When an utterance frames immigration as an invasion, it does not merely describe a situation but activates a pre-existing cognitive schema — one that carries its own logic of threat, defence, and appropriate response. The analytical implication is that the persuasive force of political language cannot be reduced to the propositional content of individual claims; it operates through the activation of frames that organise entire fields of association.

Entman's later work (2018) on 'cascading network activation' in a fragmented media environment directly addresses the platform dynamics analysed in this study. In fragmented media ecosystems, frames function not as a single flow from elites to the mass media, but as a process of selective activation, contestation and re-circulation across different actor networks, leading to the emergence of divergent narratives of the scandals examined in Chapters 3 and 4.

Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics

Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, developed by Searle (1969) into a taxonomy of speech act types, provides the analytical vocabulary for the linguo-pragmatic dimension of the study. At this level, the analysis focuses not on what the scandalous statement actually says, but on what it does: whether it functions as a distinct type of speech act or, more typically, as a hybrid construction with multiple illocutionary forces that defies straightforward classification.

Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner are applied negatively, as the analysis is concerned with systematic maxim violations as a productive rhetorical strategy rather than as communicative failures.

The results show that violations of the maxim of quality (in the form of false or unfounded claims) and the maxim of manner (through vagueness and ambiguity) serve as an effective strategy in scandalous discourse, as they allow for the creation of implicatures with disputable meanings, whilst retaining the possibility of refuting them.

Politeness Theory and Face Management

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of face-threatening acts provides the framework for analysing the impoliteness strategies that characterise the utterances under study. In canonical politeness theory, face threats are typically mitigated; in the discourse examined here, mitigation is systematically absent. Following Culpeper's (1996) work on impoliteness as a strategic communicative phenomenon, the study treats face attacks not as communicative failures but as deliberate performances whose function is to signal alignment, establish dominance, and delegitimise opponents.

Goffman's (1967) earlier concept of face provides the sociological grounding for this analysis, particularly in relation to scandal dynamics: a person is placed in "wrong face" when public information proves incompatible with the social identity

they have been projecting, and the management of this discrepancy constitutes one of the central communicative activities of political scandal.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) claim that metaphors are not decorative figures of speech but cognitive structures that organise how domains of experience are understood is central to the analysis of theme-generating concepts in Chapter 3. The conceptual metaphors IMMIGRATION IS INVASION, TRADE IS WAR, and NATION IS A BODY do not merely describe political situations; they import the inferential structure of source domains (warfare, physical threat, contamination) into the target domains of policy debate, transforming the terms on which those debates proceed.

Fillmore's (1982) frame semantics provides a complementary account of the lexical mechanisms through which metaphorical framings are enacted: individual lexical choices activate broader frames that supply background assumptions, default inferences, and evaluative orientations. The analysis of specific lexical items — "invasion," "infestation," "witch hunt," "hoax" — draws on this framework to show how single words can mobilise entire interpretive structures.

Mediatization and Platform Studies

Esser and Strömbäck's (2014) account of mediatization as a long-term process through which political communication becomes structurally dependent on media logic provides the macro-level context for the study's findings. The specific forms of scandalous discourse analysed here are not contingent features of individual political actors' rhetorical choices; they are shaped by the structural affordances of the media environments in which political communication now occurs.

Bucher (2018) and Gillespie (2018) provide the platform-specific dimension of this analysis. Algorithmic curation shapes what becomes visible and salient; engagement metrics incentivise content that generates strong reactions; and the architecture of platforms such as X and TikTok structures how utterances are extracted, recirculated, and recontextualised. Marwick and Boyd's (2011) concept of context collapse — the collapse of distinct audience contexts into a single, undifferentiated public — is directly relevant to understanding why utterances produced in one communicative setting routinely take on different functions when they enter broader circulation.

Theory of Theme-Generating Concepts

Prykhodko's theory of theme-generating concepts provides the specifically linguistic-conceptual framework for Chapter 3. In Prykhodko's account, theme-generating concepts are multi-layered cognitive structures that anchor discourse, organise meaning around themselves, and shift what is treated as the default frame for discussing a given domain. The concept's analytical utility for the present study lies in its capacity to account for the way political concepts such as MIGRANTS or FAKE NEWS function not merely as topics but as discursive engines: they generate

scenarios, activate associated concepts, and sustain attention across multiple communicative events.

2.3. Research Procedure

The work was structured into four analytical stages corresponding to the different levels of the research subject. The stages unfolded sequentially but remained interdependent: the preliminary results guided the subsequent analytical approach.

Stage 1: Identification of Theme-Generating Concepts

The first stage involved the identification of the principal theme-generating concepts operative in the political discourse under analysis. The procedure combined close reading of primary source material with the application of Prykhodko's framework for concept identification: a unit was treated as a theme-generating concept when it met three criteria — recurrence across communicative events, capacity to generate derivative discourse (scenarios, counter-framings, media cycles), and structural connection to other concepts within a broader ideological field.

The concept of MIGRANTS illustrates this process. The term recurs in Trump's speeches, posts on Truth Social and rally speeches between 2022 and 2026 in forms such as 'illegals', 'invasion', 'migrant criminals' and 'poisoning our country'. Its capacity to generate discourse is evidenced by sustained media cycles and reactions in the form of fact-checking and counter-narratives (notably the episode in Springfield, Ohio, analysed in Chapter 3). Its structural links connect it to NATIONAL SECURITY, ECONOMIC COMPETITION and the broader MAGA framework, allowing it to be viewed as a node in a system of mutually reinforcing concepts rather than as an isolated rhetorical choice.

As a result of this procedure, six theme-generating concepts were identified: MIGRANTS, TARIFFS, DEEP STATE, FAKE NEWS, CHINA and MAGA. The selection criterion was theoretical saturation rather than frequency: only those concepts that formed structurally distinct patterns were included in the analysis.

Stage 2: Construction of a Typology of Scandalous Scenarios

The second stage involved the construction of a typology of the scandalous scenarios that arise when theme-generating concepts enter media circulation. A scenario was defined as a recurring narrative pattern in which an utterance or cluster of utterances is framed as carrying implications that extend beyond its surface content — implications of threat, moral violation, or institutional danger.

The typology was built inductively from the material, with the analytical procedure involving three steps for each candidate scenario: (i) identification of the originating utterance and its immediate communicative context; (ii) documentation of how the utterance was framed across media outlets with different political

orientations; and (iii) analysis of the discursive mechanisms through which the gap between the original utterance and its mediated form was produced.

The "bloodbath" case illustrates this procedure. Trump's use of the word at a rally in Dayton, Ohio (16 March 2024) was initially embedded in a discussion of the auto industry and trade policy: the referent was economic, and the term functioned as a hyperbolic description of anticipated market consequences. In subsequent media circulation, the economic context was progressively stripped away through decontextualisation — the word was extracted from its framing and circulated as a freestanding fragment. This produced a shift in apparent referent: economic hyperbole became readable as a suggestion of political violence. The typological category generated by this case — the scenario of escalation through contextual stripping — was then applied comparatively across other instances of similar morphology.

Stage 3: Three-Level Linguistic Analysis

The third stage applied the three-level analytical framework (linguo-stylistic, linguo-rhetorical, linguo-pragmatic) to the utterances and their media representations. Each level of analysis was conducted in two passes: first on the original utterance, then on a selection of media representations, with the comparison structured around the question of what shifts between production and circulation.

Trump's statement during the first presidential debate on 29 September 2020, in which he told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by", exemplifies how this three-level procedure operates. At the linguistic and stylistic level, the statement is characterised by conciseness, an imperative syntactic form and a direct appeal to a specific group; in contrast to the prevailing political rhetoric, these features single out a specific addressee within a wider audience. At the linguo-rhetorical level, the statement exploits strategic ambiguity: "stand back" is conventionally associated with restraint, while "stand by" implies readiness for action, and the co-occurrence of the two imperatives creates an indeterminate illocutionary profile that resists straightforward classification as either a command to desist or a command to prepare. At the linguo-pragmatic level, the statement's force depends substantially on what is left unstated: the conditions under which "standing by" would become relevant, and the actions that readiness would entail, are implied rather than specified, generating implicatures that different audiences could interpret divergently.

The comparative pass across media representations revealed a systematic divergence: reporting in *The New York Times* consistently foregrounded the phrase "stand by" and contextualised the statement within coverage of the events of January 6, shifting the utterance toward a directive reading with post-hoc evidential support; coverage in Fox News and right-leaning outlets foregrounded "stand back" and framed the statement as a call for restraint, producing an opposite interpretive trajectory from the same source material. This divergence — not in the words reported but in which words were made salient — exemplifies the

decontextualisation and recontextualisation mechanism that the study treats as a primary vehicle for scandal construction in media discourse.

Stage 4: Comparative Analysis of Original and Mediated Discourse

The fourth stage synthesised the findings of Stages 1–3 into a comparative account of how scandalous utterances are transformed through media processing. The comparison was structured around four dimensions: lexical salience (which words were selected for quotation and which were omitted); modality (how degrees of certainty, responsibility, and intentionality were attributed); visual framing (how accompanying images inflected the interpretive context); and temporal placement (whether the utterance was reported as isolated or embedded within a broader pattern of conduct).

The mechanism of decontextualisation and recontextualisation, first outlined in the work of Norman Fairclough (1995) and further developed in Diana Zulli's research (2020), is treated in this study as an operational analytical tool. The analysis focused not on reconstructing a single 'authentic' context, but on tracing how a statement functions in various contextual configurations. Tracing its path from the initial conditions of its articulation to subsequent decontextualisations and recontextualisations in media circulation and the associated shifts in meaning.

Throughout all four stages, the analysis systematically distinguishes between utterances as acts of production and as objects of circulation. The theoretical significance of this distinction lies therein that interpretative effects are attributed not to the speaker's intentions, but to the discursive mechanisms that mediate, amplify and reconstruct political utterances.

2.4. Hypothesis and Research Questions

The study is organised around the following working hypothesis: scandalous political utterances in contemporary American media discourse function not as incidental breaches of communicative norms but as structurally embedded discursive acts whose scandal-generating properties emerge at the intersection of three independently necessary conditions: the linguistic organisation of the utterance itself, the framing choices made in media representations, and the algorithmic and editorial dynamics of the platforms through which utterances circulate.

This hypothesis suggests that no single level of analysis is sufficient to explain how a statement becomes controversial. A linguistically provocative utterance may not cause a scandal if it does not receive media amplification; conversely, an outwardly neutral utterance can acquire scandalous potency through aggressive recontextualisation. The multi-level structure of the study is a direct consequence of this theoretical assumption.

Four research questions operationalise this hypothesis:

RQ1: Which theme-generating concepts function as consistent triggers of controversy in the political discourse of the Trump era in American politics, and

what is their discursive role? This question is addressed in Chapter 3, which identifies six theme-generating concepts and describes their structural properties.

RQ2: What typology of scandalous scenarios emerges from the interaction between political utterances and their media representations? This question is also addressed in Chapter 3 through the inductive construction of a scenario typology from the empirical material.

RQ3: What are the linguo-stylistic, linguo-rhetorical and linguo-pragmatic properties of controversial utterances, and how do these properties change when the utterances are processed through media representation? This question is addressed in Chapter 4, in which a three-level analytical framework is applied to both the original utterances and their mediated forms.

RQ4: What happens to a scandalous utterance once it enters media circulation, and which discursive mechanisms account for the gap between what was said and what gets reported? This question is addressed in Chapter 4, where the comparative analysis traces how the same statement functions differently depending on which outlet frames it and how.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in three contributions. Firstly, it further develops the concept of 'theme-generating concepts' (A.M. Prykhodko) by applying it to material from American political scandal discourse from 2016 to 2026. Secondly, the three-level linguistic-stylistic, linguistic-rhetorical and linguistic-pragmatic analysis is supplemented by a comparative description of original and mediated discourse, allowing them to be considered in relation to one another rather than as separate entities. Thirdly, the study documents specific discursive mechanisms through which scandals are constructed and normalised in the media environment after 2020.

Conclusions to Chapter 2

Chapter 2 established the methodological foundation on which the analytical chapters rest. Section 2.1 defined the scope of the empirical material and justified the selection of sources on the basis of discursive prominence, ideological range, and the requirement for systematic left-right comparison. Section 2.2 assembled the theoretical-methodological framework, drawing on CDA, framing theory, speech act theory, politeness theory, conceptual metaphor theory, mediatization studies, and the theory of theme-generating concepts, with each framework assigned a specific analytical role rather than treated as background context.

Section 2.3 described the four-stage research procedure and illustrated each stage with a concrete analytical example: the identification of MIGRANTS as a theme-generating concept, the typological analysis of the "bloodbath" scenario, the three-level analysis of the "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by" statement, and the comparative analysis of NYT versus Fox News representations. Section 2.4 sets out the working hypothesis and four research questions and identifies the place of each within the structure of the study's sections.

Viewed together, these sections demonstrate the consistency of the analytical procedures with the theoretical foundations of the study, the relevance of the theoretical framework to the object of analysis, and the possibility of answering the research questions within the given framework and methods. The chapters that follow apply this framework to the empirical material in the sequence determined by the research questions.

Chapter 3. Conceptual Foundations of "Scandalous" Verbal Actions in the Mass Media Space

3.1. Theme-Generating Concepts

In Prykhodko's account, theme-generating concepts are multi-layered cognitive structures whose defining property is the capacity to anchor discourse: they determine what gets discussed and the terms on which discussion proceeds. Once embedded in political communication, such concepts stop describing reality and begin restructuring it, as the debate shifts terrain before substantive argument can take hold. The same pattern has been described in critical discourse analysis, particularly in the work of Teun A. van Dijk and Ruth Wodak: populist discourse does not merely rely on oppositions such as "us" and "them", it actively sustains them, with theme-generating concepts acting as focal points that concentrate affective responses, organise evaluation, and channel political positions in a specific direction. Trump's direct address through Twitter and later Truth Social reinforces this dynamic, as audiences receive statements without journalistic mediation.

The choice of these six concepts comes from the material itself. They recur across political communication, generate extended chains of responses, and are repeatedly linked to conflict and scandal-related narratives. While other concepts may appear in the data, these six demonstrate the highest degree of discursive productivity and stability across contexts. The focus is therefore analytical rather than exhaustive.

In Donald Trump's political communication, these concepts do not function as neutral topics. They act as triggers and, at times, as instruments of escalation: Trump keeps them in play and uses them to steer public attention. Take *MIGRANTS*: they are framed as an existential threat, instantly hijacking any calm policy debate and turning it into a frantic exchange about security. *TARIFFS* undergo the same mutation, ceasing to be about trade and starting to sound like national defence. Trump isn't merely criticising the press when he shouts *FAKE NEWS*; he is denying the media the right to exist as an institution. Even the *DEEP STATE* follows this pattern, interpreting ordinary political processes as the result of an imaginary conspiracy. *CHINA* appears not simply as a country but as a recurring image of external pressure and economic loss, while *MAGA* moves in the opposite direction and promises a return to a stable and familiar past.

MIGRANTS

Immigration functions in Trump's discourse not as a policy issue but as a structuring frame. Research on immigration coverage in US media documents the repeated dissemination of a narrow set of narratives linking immigration with crime, a pattern consistent with the illusory truth effect discussed in Chapter 1 (Fazio et al., 2015). Repetition normalises exaggerated claims, and normalisation creates the effect of their credibility.

A characteristic feature of this rhetoric is the linking of immigration with crime. This link is asserted time and again, even though criminological studies consistently fail to confirm it: as Ousey and Kubrin (2018) have shown, immigrants do not commit more crimes than the native population. Despite this, the claim persists, and it is precisely this discrepancy that functions as a mechanism ensuring the concept's ability to generate controversy and sustain the audience's attention over a long period. Metaphor plays a role here as well. Immigration is often framed not as movement or policy, but as invasion: expressions such as "migrant criminals", "killers", "gang members", "poisoning our country", or "the largest invasion in the history of our country" shift the terms of the discussion, and once this framing takes hold, the issue no longer reads as administrative or economic, it becomes a matter of threat and protection. References to an "army of migrant gangs" introduce a more organised image of danger that is difficult to counter once it settles into the discourse.

Edilashvili (2025, p. 153) documents how Trump's discourse "foregrounded illegality, mass migration, and social disruption, deploying registers of fear and urgency" and "redirected the immigration debate away from legislative and humanitarian considerations toward narratives of crisis, security, and identity." Wodak (2021, p. 27) situates this within a broader pattern of right-wing populist discourse, in which the politics of fear constructs migrants and minorities as threats to security, identity, and prosperity through the continuous dramatisation of crisis as a central discursive strategy. At the cognitive level, George Lakoff's theory of framing (Lakoff, 2004) explains why this dynamic proves so persistent. Political discourse activates pre-existing mental models rather than individual arguments; these models operate rapidly and largely beyond conscious control. Theme-generating concepts work in exactly this way. They organise perception before reasoning sets in, and once a frame settles into public discourse, redirecting it becomes hard.

Trump's remark about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, did not stay a one-off. It moved through headlines, short clips and reposts and turned into a story of its own within hours. The phrase itself was spoken during the presidential debate with Kamala Harris on 10 September 2024 on ABC News: "In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They're eating – they are eating the pets of the people that live there." (ABC News, 2024). The claim was based on several viral online posts from the previous week: some claims originated from a YouTube video and a Facebook post, the author of which later retracted her statement. Springfield local authorities officially stated that "no credible reports or specific claims of pets being harmed" had been recorded (Fox News, 2024). The claim did not go away. It kept circulating, often without any mention of the earlier debunkings, and the repetition outlasted the correction. PolitiFact named the story Lie of the Year 2024. Trump and his running mate kept pushing it. Particularly telling is Vance's comment in an interview with Dana Bash on CNN's "State of the Union" on 15 September 2024: "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American

people, then that's what I'm going to do" (Astor, 2024). This phrasing makes the logic of the strategy clear: the aim is not to verify the claim, but to keep it circulating for as long as possible in order to dominate the audience's attention.

The social effects were not abstract. After the story went viral, Springfield faced a wave of bomb threats, leading to school closures and the evacuation of public buildings; Ohio Governor Mike DeWine publicly dismissed the claims as "a piece of rubbish that was simply not true". In other words, the rhetoric did not stop at mere words, but manifested itself in fear, disruption to daily life and a sense of vulnerability within the local community. The racial dimension of this discourse is also evident: the claims echoed much older stereotypes about migrants as culturally alien, dangerous and uncivilised. The concept of *MIGRANTS* in Trump's discourse appears not as a new construct, but as a revival of older racist tropes in the contemporary media landscape.

Survey data point in the same direction. According to a Jones poll conducted June 3 to 23, 2024, 55% of Americans wanted immigration reduced, up from 41% a year earlier and the first time since 2005 that a majority took this position, even if earlier peaks (65% in 1993 and 1995, 58% in 2001) were higher still (Jones, 2024). A subsequent KFF/Los Angeles Times survey of immigrants found that many felt Trump's campaign rhetoric had worsened public attitudes towards them in the US (Schumacher et al., 2023). Taken together, these data show how persistent anti-immigration narratives can influence public sentiment and intensify social hostility. In Trump's discourse, the concept of *MIGRANTS* is closely intertwined with the thematic concepts of *NATIONAL SECURITY* and *ECONOMIC COMPETITION*: immigration is systematically presented alongside terrorism, drug trafficking and economic harm to American workers, and from this interweaving emerges an image of a multifaceted existential threat.

TARIFFS

In Trump's political discourse, tariffs function as a key element of economic nationalism and populist protectionism. In contrast to traditional conservative support for free trade, Trump has redefined tariffs not merely as an economic tool, but as a symbolic marker of sovereignty and a means of punishing allegedly unfair trading partners. During the 2024 election campaign, tariff policy became one of the central elements of Trump's economic platform. The CSIS report 'Trump Trade 2.0' (2024) records that, on the campaign trail, Trump set out a plan involving tariffs of no less than 60% on Chinese imports and a baseline of 10 to 20% on imported goods overall, while leaving room for steeper rates on specific products and partners. Within this framework, the trade deficit is presented not as a technical imbalance, but as a sign of national defeat, whilst tariffs are portrayed as acts of economic defence. Such rhetoric shifts economic policy into the realm of moral and national struggle, within which trading partners are portrayed not as competitors, but as actors who are 'robbing' America. The discourse is structured around the conceptual metaphor *TRADE IS WAR*.

After Trump returned to office in January 2025, tariff policy intensified quickly. During what the White House described as "Liberation Day" week, beginning 2 April 2025, a series of rapid increases brought the effective US tariff on Chinese imports to 145% by 9 April (Bown, 2026b). China's Ministry of Finance responded on 11 April 2025 by raising duties on US goods to 125%, stating that further escalation would "lose economic sense" (CNBC, 2025). The speed of these moves — several increases within a single week, enabled by the use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to bypass standard Department of Commerce procedures — suggests they were driven less by long-term economic planning than by political intent (CSIS, 2024). The trade war no longer looked like rhetoric; the effects appeared quickly and spread across the economy.

The market reaction was immediate. Stock prices dropped sharply, then jumped back up once Trump announced a 90-day pause on reciprocal tariffs for most countries, with China kept out of the exception, on 9 April 2025. Reuters reported that the S&P 500 had been falling steeply in the days before the pause, then climbed by 9.5% the day the announcement came through (Reuters, 2025). Trump's rhetoric around tariffs went further than the policy itself. He suggested at one point that tariff revenue could eventually replace the federal income tax altogether, a claim the Tax Foundation rejected as mathematically impossible, since the income tax raises more than twenty times what tariffs bring in, and any rates high enough to close the gap would suppress imports and erase the revenue base (York, 2025). The distance between what was said and what could realistically be done shows what tariff language was actually doing: not describing a workable policy but rallying political support.

China became the main arena for this approach. By June 2025, US imports from China had dropped to roughly half their level a year earlier, the lowest since the 2009 financial crisis; April 2025 was the month when China effectively stopped buying a large share of US exports (Bown, 2026b). Retaliation came fast. By mid-2025 American agricultural exports had collapsed, and farmers absorbed most of the immediate damage. Beijing went straight for the sector with the least flexibility, and producers had nowhere to redirect their output. What had sounded in political speeches like leverage quickly read on the ground as loss.

Trump's use of tariffs pushes them far beyond their usual role: they are no longer just an economic tool but a blunt instrument applied across unrelated problems, from trade deficits to border control. Once a single policy starts doing everything, it stops serving as a precise measure and becomes a political signal. The rhetoric around tariffs reinforces this shift, trade is no longer described in technical terms but recast as a moral conflict, and when phrases like "China is ripping us off" enter the frame, economic relations are reduced to a simple story of victim and aggressor. Tariffs also sit at the centre of the "America First" narrative: the contrast between "fair" and "free" trade reframes earlier policy as a failure to protect national interests, so that tariffs become proof of political loyalty to domestic workers.

FAKE NEWS

The concept of FAKE NEWS is one of the most striking discursive innovations in Donald Trump's rhetoric. Unlike concepts that focus on specific social groups or politicians, this one targets the information infrastructure of a democratic society, particularly the independent media and journalism. The phrase first gained political traction in August 2016, when Trump reacted on Twitter to a CNN report about his alleged plans to continue filming *The Apprentice* during his presidency, calling the report 'ridiculous & untrue – FAKE NEWS!'. As a systematic rhetorical strategy, the concept took shape in February 2017: on 17 February, Donald Trump labelled leading publications such as *The New York Times*, NBC, ABC, CBS and CNN as 'Fake News Media' and 'enemies of the American people', and on 23 February at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) he publicly equated 'fake news' with 'enemy of the people'. It is at this point that the two phrases, the historically charged political term 'enemy of the people' and the new 'fake news', merge into a single rhetorical construct: journalists cease to be associated with the institution of checks and balances and increasingly appear as a threat, whilst critical reporting takes on the characteristics of hostility.

Rather than responding to criticism, Donald Trump's rhetoric systematically redirects suspicion towards those who voice it: critical claims are not refuted, but labelled as 'fake', thereby allowing the source to be discredited without addressing the substance of the argument. Through repetition, this practice gradually erodes trust in journalism as an institution, functioning as a strategy of delegitimation through labelling and generalisation. At the same time, the concept of 'FAKE NEWS' in his statements is regularly combined with narratives about the Deep State and elite conspiracies, in which the media are portrayed as part of a hostile system of power; within this framework, criticism is pushed beyond the boundaries of the journalistic sphere and recoded as bias or a coordinated attack. An additional element of this rhetoric is the appeal to 'alternative facts', which blurs the line between fact and interpretation: different versions of events are presented as equally valid, whilst constant attacks on the media open the door to alternative, particularly conspiracy theory-based, sources of information.

During the 2024 election campaign and following Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the concept of FAKE NEWS not only retained its function but also took on harsher and more physical forms. At a rally in Pennsylvania in November 2024, describing the glass bulletproof barriers around him, Trump resorted to a rhetorical device in which the media were figuratively placed between the politician and a potential attacker, becoming a physical shield-target. In 2025, reacting to polls showing low ratings, he consistently referred to them on Truth Social as 'fakes from the lying media', refusing to acknowledge the results, which echoed the logic of 2016–2017, but now on a new media platform. *The Washington Post*, *Politico* and the *Associated Press*, which together represent the leading national publications, have become the targets of this rhetorical strategy. Compared to his first term, the rhetoric became more direct: the media are referred to not only as 'fake news', but also as the 'enemy from within' and 'spreaders of disinformation', which definitively shifts them from the realm of journalism into the realm of war.

DEEP STATE

The concept of the 'Deep State' is one of the central discursive constructs in Trump's rhetoric, transforming institutional resistance into a conspiracy. The term itself derives from the Turkish 'derin devlet' and originally described real, hidden alliances between the military, the secret services and organised crime in authoritarian states, such as Turkey in the 1990s and Egypt under Mubarak. The concept entered American political discourse via conservative publications following the 2016 election: just a month after Trump's victory, Breitbart wrote of a 'complex of bureaucrats, technocrats, and plutocrats' allegedly ready to overturn the election results. In Trump's rhetoric, the DEEP STATE functions as a master explanation for any form of institutional resistance: dissent from the federal bureaucracy, procedural restraints from the courts, FBI investigations and intelligence agency findings are recoded as coordinated subversive activity by an invisible network of unelected officials. The slogan 'drain the swamp' anchors this logic in a spatial metaphor: Washington is portrayed not as the centre of democratic governance, but as a swamp of entrenched corruption in need of draining. The conceptual metaphor structuring this discourse is GOVERNMENT IS A CONSPIRACY, a formula that overturns the usual hierarchy of legitimacy, as the democratically elected president is portrayed as a victim, and the institutions accountable to him as usurpers.

Whilst during his first term the 'Deep State' remained largely a rhetorical framework, in 2024–2025 it evolved into a programme of institutional dismantling. Back during the 2024 campaign, Trump had declared his intention to 'demolish the deep state', and following his victory, he proceeded to put this pledge into practice through his appointments. Among the key appointments mentioned were Matt Gaetz as Attorney General, Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defence, and Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence. The New York Times described these decisions as the formation of 'lead shock troops' in a 'self-declared war on what he calls the deep state', emphasising that the decisive selection criterion was primarily loyalty rather than professional competence (Baker, 2024). Schedule F, an executive order allowing the reclassification of tens of thousands of civil servants and their replacement with political appointees, has become a strategic tool in this war. Back in 2017 at CPAC, Stephen Bannon framed this course as the 'deconstruction of the administrative state', and it is precisely this phrase that most accurately describes the function of the DEEP STATE concept in the second term: it legitimises not merely personnel purges, but the dismantling of the very principle of a professional, politically neutral bureaucracy. The paradox lies in the fact that the very institutions which the concept of the DEEP STATE portrays as a threat to democracy, the courts, independent agencies and career civil servants, are, in the liberal tradition, its guarantors; thus, an attack on the 'deep state' turns out to be an attack on the horizontal checks and balances on executive power as such.

CHINA

In Trump's discourse, the concept of CHINA functions as a single, integrated image of the enemy, combining economic, technological, geopolitical and health-related dimensions into a single framework of threat. Unlike traditional American foreign policy rhetoric, which distinguished China as a trading partner, a strategic competitor and an authoritarian state, Trump reduces these dimensions to a single formula: China as a zero-sum opponent that systematically 'robs' America. The economic dimension is, first and foremost, the trade deficit, reframed as a national defeat (see the section on TARIFFS): according to CSIS, as early as during the 2024 campaign, Trump promised tariffs of at least 60 per cent on all Chinese imports, and in April 2025, as part of 'Liberation Day', rates reached 145 per cent, to which Beijing responded with a symmetrical increase to 125 per cent (Bown, 2026b). The technological dimension involves the struggle for leadership in the fields of artificial intelligence and semiconductors, where the transfer of technology to China is effectively regarded as an act of treason; the geopolitical dimension concerns Taiwan, the South China Sea and competition in the Indo-Pacific region, where China is portrayed as the main long-term threat to American leadership.

The 'sanitary register' occupies a special place in this framework. The phrase 'China virus', which Trump used systematically in 2020 to refer to COVID-19, extended the logic of threat to the realm of public health, linking the global pandemic to a national source and normalising the perception of China as the literal source of the infection. The conceptual metaphor structuring this discourse is CHINA IS A VIRUS, a phrase that medicalises the political and economic threat and legitimises the rhetoric of isolation and 'decoupling' as a public health, rather than merely an economic necessity. A series of recurring rhetorical formulas are subordinated to this metaphor: 'China is ripping us off' reduces complex trade relations to the moral category of theft; 'America last' (as a characterisation of the previous policy of 'engaging' China) transforms a diplomatic tradition into national treason; promises to 'demolish', 'crush' and 'defeat' China mobilise the vocabulary of war rather than that of negotiation. Crucially, these phrases do not describe specific policy decisions, but shape an emotional landscape in which any interaction with China is, by default, labelled as capitulation.

During his second term, this discourse shifted from the realm of rhetoric to that of institutional policy. The intellectual foundation was Robert Lighthizer's book *No Trade Is Free* (2023), in which the former and current US Trade Representative argues for 'strategic decoupling', a concept of a complete systemic break with China as the sole response to the 'economic war' that China is allegedly waging against the US. The Heritage Foundation's policy document *Project 2025: Mandate for Leadership* elaborates on this position through a list of practical steps: maximum pressure on Beijing, the closure of Confucius Institutes in the US, and a ban on Chinese investment in critical infrastructure. The 2025 personnel policy reinforces this line: Marco Rubio as Secretary of State and Mike Waltz as National Security Advisor are known for their long-standing stance that China is the US's primary adversary (Baker, 2024). The 'Liberation Day' tariff decisions in April 2025 marked the practical implementation of this policy: according to Bown, by June 2025 US

imports from China were roughly half their levels of a year earlier, falling to depths not seen since the financial crisis of 2009, while China essentially ceased purchasing US exports in April 2025, with shipments dropping to levels last seen during the 2008–09 global financial crisis (Bown, 2026b). Thus, whilst during the first term CHINA functioned primarily as a rhetorical figure of mobilisation, in the second term it became an organisational principle of economic, technological and security policy at the same time, a shift that might otherwise be described as a transition from a 'concept-label' to a 'concept-programme'.

MAGA

Unlike the previous five concepts, MAGA functions not as a framework of threat but as a promise of renewal, and it is precisely this functional difference that defines its discursive structure. The slogan 'Make America Great Again' refers to a nostalgically constructed image of the past, a loosely defined period in which America is imagined as 'great' and in need of restoration. It is crucial to note that neither the slogan itself nor Donald Trump's rhetoric clarify which historical period is being referred to: is it the post-war industrial boom of the 1950s, the pre-collectivisation era before the civil rights movement, or the economic model prior to the globalisation of the 1980s? Such uncertainty is not a flaw, but rather a functional prerequisite for the slogan's effectiveness. In Laclau's (2005) terms, MAGA functions as an 'empty signifier' — a signifier devoid of fixed meaning, which different social groups can fill with their own versions of lost stability. A worker in the deindustrialised West invests it with economic revenge; a religious conservative, a return to traditional values; an opponent of immigration, ethno-cultural renewal. It is precisely because of this emptiness that MAGA is able to unite into a common coalition groups whose specific interests are often incompatible with one another.

The second notable feature of the MAGA concept is its semantic transformation from a slogan into a category of identity. Whilst in 2016, 'Make America Great Again' was primarily a promise, a message a politician addresses to voters, by the 2020s the phrases 'MAGA Republicans', 'MAGA base', 'MAGA voters' had become an established category to describe people, initially in the internal discourse of Trump's supporters, and later in the language of his opponents. The Joe Biden administration used the term 'MAGA Republicans' as a label to brand political opponents as 'extremists' and 'threats to democracy', an attempt which, paradoxically, only reinforced the concept, as it transformed it from a self-designation into a widely recognised category of political identity. This semantic shift, from slogan to people, is an analytical fact in its own right: it shows how an empty signifier, circulating in public discourse, gradually solidifies into a social category. During the 2024 campaign, Trump cemented this identity function with the phrase 'I am your retribution', delivered at CPAC 2024: the slogan ceased to signify a programme and began to signify a shared emotion, a grievance that the leader promises to avenge on behalf of 'real Americans'.

During its second term, MAGA underwent a final transformation, evolving from an identity category into a principle of institutional organisation. Whilst the

concepts of the DEEP STATE and CHINA function in the second term as frameworks for dismantling and confrontation, MAGA provides a positive legitimising basis for those very same processes: it is not merely the 'destruction of the deep state', but the 'restoration of America's greatness'. The intellectual foundation for this transition was Project 2025, a policy document by the Heritage Foundation, which the media rightly describe as the 'intellectual engine' of the new administration. The staffing logic of 2025 is directly subordinate to this principle: the primary qualification for appointments has become not relevant expertise, but loyalty to the MAGA agenda (Baker, 2024), which allows us to speak of the formation of a 'MAGA cabinet' in a literal, rather than metaphorical, sense. The Schedule F mechanism, which involves reclassifying tens of thousands of civil servants as political appointees, is described by the media as the 'MAGA-isation of the bureaucracy', the replacement of the professional apparatus with an ideologically loyal one. The internal tension of the concept, however, has not disappeared: the rift between 'MAGA isolationists', who oppose any foreign military operations, and 'MAGA hawks', who support a hardline policy towards China and Iran, shows that the empty signifier retains its emptiness even when it becomes a programme. It is precisely this residual openness that allows MAGA to withstand internal contradictions that would destroy a more defined political concept.

3.2. A Typology of "Scandalous" Scenarios

As van Dijk (2021) notes, meaning emerges not from the message alone but from how it is interpreted. Trump's statements are characteristically open-ended, built on broad notions such as "strength" or "weakness" rather than developed arguments, which allows them to be inserted into divergent narrative frameworks. This corresponds to Entman's (2018) account of framing in fragmented media environments, where multiple interpretations coexist without resolving into a dominant one. Contemporary disinformation, as Bennett and Livingston (2018) observe, operates less through fabrication than through reframing.

The scenario of an approaching global conflict

One recurring pattern built around Trump's discourse is the narrative of an approaching global conflict. Notably, Trump rarely formulates such predictions in direct terms; instead, his statements follow a conditional logic: if strength is lacking, escalation becomes possible. This can be seen in a Truth Social post from March 2024:

"We need STRENGTH and POWER to prevent World War Three..."

Examined on its own, the statement reads as a warning rather than a prediction. The shift happens later. In some cases, headlines recast this conditional logic as a near-factual claim, for instance, formulations along the lines of "Trump warns of looming global war". Elsewhere, the same statement appears in a different frame, focusing instead on criticism of current policy, as in "Trump calls for strength

to avoid escalation". What changes here is not the wording, but the modality: a hypothetical scenario begins to circulate as if it were a concrete assessment.

The scenario of an authoritarian turn

Whilst the previous scenario focuses on external threats, this one shifts the focus to the domestic dimension, specifically the potential transformation of democratic institutions. A turning point came during a meeting with voters organised by Fox News in December 2023, during which Donald Trump stated:

"Except for day one... After that, I'm not a dictator."

In context, the remark can be read as hyperbolic and partly ironic: he immediately referred to specific policy steps, such as closing the border and expanding drilling, which he claimed he would pursue at the start of a new term. Fast executive action of this kind is not unusual in US politics. At the same time, media coverage often isolates the word "dictator" from the rest of the exchange. When a statement is taken out of context, it ceases to function as hyperbole and begins to be perceived as a potentially serious indication of authoritarian intentions. This perception is reinforced when individual statements are read together: references to the 2020 election, 6 January and 'retribution' construct a broader scenario of a possible authoritarian shift.

A similar dynamic appears in Trump's use of the word "vermin" to describe political opponents. In media coverage, the term is frequently linked to historical examples of dehumanising rhetoric; such comparisons intensify the sense of alarm, although their relevance is still debated. In Trump's own phrasing, however, the metaphor targets political groups rather than ethnic or racial communities. The same pattern can be seen in the rhetoric of "retribution": the phrase "I am your retribution" positions the political leader as a direct embodiment of the people's will, which in a populist framework points to a more personalised understanding of political action, though media interpretations often move the emphasis toward revenge and abuse of power.

The "bloodbath" scenario

Another example comes from a campaign rally on 16 March 2024, in Dayton, Ohio, where Donald Trump used the word "bloodbath" while talking about the auto industry and the economic consequences of current trade policy. Once the phrase began circulating on its own, the context dropped out. Some headlines picked up the word and left the industry angle aside, which sounded far more dramatic than it was in the original setting, and the same line could point to economic loss in one version and suggest something closer to violence in another. This is often described as contextomy, but the mechanism is simple: a phrase gets repeated without its context until it begins to carry a different weight. Once short fragments move faster than full statements, meaning becomes unstable; the original context is still there, but it no longer controls how the statement is understood.

The scenario of economic threat

The next scenario moves to economic policy, especially tariffs and trade restrictions, and how they are presented as sources of risk. A useful reference point is Trump's 2024 economic programme, often called Agenda 47, which includes broad import tariffs and higher duties on Chinese goods. In his own framing, these measures are about "fair trade" and bringing production back to the United States. Media coverage, however, often presents them in more dramatic terms, as a possible threat to the global economy, linked to higher prices, trade retaliation, and even recession, so that a policy proposal is turned into a wider story about economic crisis.

Part of this comes from how expert opinion is used. Mainstream economic coverage tends to foreground critical analyses of broad tariffs as regressive in their distributional effects, while obscuring more heterodox positions that defend strategic protection. Historical comparisons reinforce the negative framing: Smoot–Hawley (1930), associated with the deepening of the Great Depression in the work of trade historian Douglas Irwin (2017), is regularly invoked in discussions of Trump's tariff agenda. There are, however, other ways to read these policies: in more conservative interpretations, tariffs are seen as tools to protect domestic industries and key sectors.

A similar dynamic appears in discussions of the Federal Reserve. When Donald Trump claims that he has "better instincts" about the economy than Fed officials, the statement does not outline a specific policy, yet it is often read in media coverage as raising questions about the independence of the central bank. What begins as a general claim about economic judgment can turn into a broader scenario, one that centres on the risk of financial instability under political influence, while critics of the Fed draw on the same remarks to argue for greater political oversight.

The scenario of immigration rhetoric

The fourth scenario centres on immigration rhetoric and its portrayal in the media. One of the most widely discussed examples was Donald Trump's 2023 statement that immigrants were 'poisoning the blood of our country'. These words drew sharp criticism, notably from the Anti-Defamation League, whose director Jonathan Greenblatt called such language "racist, xenophobic and repugnant", as well as from historians such as Jason Stanley (Yale University), who drew a direct parallel with the rhetoric of *Mein Kampf*, in which Adolf Hitler warned of the 'poisoning' of German blood by Jews. Such comparisons heighten feelings of anxiety, although their appropriateness remains a matter of debate: Trump's team, notably his spokesperson Stephen Cheung, dismissed these comparisons as 'nonsensical', insisting that similar language is widely used in books, the media and on television.

In Trump's own phrasing, the emphasis is on immigration as a source of social tension, crime and pressure on public services, rather than on biological arguments in the literal sense. At the same time, metaphors such as 'poison' or 'invasion' have a distinct dehumanising effect regardless of how they are intended. It is telling that in one of his speeches, Trump stated that he does not consider migrants to be 'people', and in an interview with Fox News, when responding to a direct question from

journalist Howard Kurtz about the words 'vermin' and 'poisoning of the blood', he repeated his thesis without softening it.

The scenario of confrontation with the legal system

A separate scenario develops around Trump's interaction with the legal system. His repeated use of phrases such as "witch hunt", "political persecution", and "rigged system" offers an alternative way of framing ongoing investigations and court proceedings. In much of the media, this rhetoric is read as an attempt to undermine the rule of law. At the same time, more conservative interpretations present the same events as evidence that the justice system itself has become politicised. The same set of developments — criminal charges, court rulings, public statements — can therefore be taken to support sharply different conclusions. What we see here is not simply disagreement, but divergence: the same events begin to carry different meanings depending on how they are framed.

The fragmented discursive space

The analysis points to a fragmented discursive space within which multiple interpretations coexist without forming a unified field of meaning. Donald Trump's statements remain sufficiently open-ended to fuel these conflicting interpretations. During the 2024 campaign, his repeated use of the phrase "stolen election" blends the frame of crime with that of a political process — the point is not that this claim can be verified but the effect it creates: a sense of injustice that can mobilise supporters. A similar pattern appears in Trump's claim that Kamala Harris used AI-generated images to exaggerate the size of her rally crowds: the claim was not supported by evidence, yet it circulated widely — the statement works because it sounds provocative and confident, less like a description and more like something that does things.

3.3. Linguo-Conceptual Foundations of Verbal Manipulation

Verbal manipulation in contemporary political discourse has undergone a structural shift. Where earlier strategies tended to conceal falsehoods or render them plausible, the current pattern is more openly performative: false or misleading claims are not disguised but deployed, and their function is less epistemic than positional. This shift requires revisiting the mechanisms of manipulation from the combined perspective of cognitive linguistics and pragmatics.

One way to make sense of this shift is through the concept of the simulacrum, discussed by Jean Baudrillard. A simulacrum is usually defined as a "sign without a referent": it does not reflect reality but produces a version of it. In political discourse, such constructions begin to function as their own reality, shaping how events are understood; unlike concepts, which help interpret reality, simulacra generate alternative versions of it through discourse (Baudrillard, 1994). This is where the idea of performativity becomes useful. As Austin (1962) argued, some utterances do not simply describe reality but attempt to change it. Trump's statements often work

this way, placing less emphasis on factual proof and more on steering how people interpret events; as Hameleers (2023) points out, the fact that something was said plays a far greater role than what was said.

Under post-truth conditions, statements circulate as signals supporting a particular interpretation rather than as claims requiring proof. Fact-checking loses traction not because evidence is absent but because, as Lee McIntyre (2024) shows, the tension lies in how situations are framed rather than in the facts themselves. Harry Frankfurt's (2005) concept of "bullshit", speech deployed for effect rather than accuracy, captures the pragmatic logic of this mode of communication.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a metaphor is not a purely decorative feature of language, but a fundamental mechanism by which political reality is understood. In manipulative discourse, this mechanism takes on special significance, as metaphors can reframe events even before conscious evaluation takes place. They argue that metaphors do more than decorate language; they shape how people make sense of political reality, and in manipulative discourse, they do not just describe events, they reorganise them. The force of this metaphor comes from how easily it connects with older, more visceral models: NATION IS A BODY frames the state as something that can be harmed or infected, while SOCIETY IS A CONTAINER adds a spatial layer where something can overflow or get inside. Together, these models activate familiar fears; the issue stops looking political and starts feeling biological, centred on protection, contamination, and survival. Charles Fillmore (1982) and George Lakoff (2004) show how frames make some elements of a situation highly visible while pushing others out of view; once a frame takes hold, alternative interpretations do not disappear but become harder to access. Different groups do not simply interpret the same facts in different ways; they begin to operate within different interpretive worlds, sometimes described as "epistemic bubbles" (see also Chris Hart, 2023).

Provocation has become a structural feature of contemporary political discourse rather than a deviation from its norms. What used to count as a breach of norms now works as a tactic, what Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2021) call "attention hacking": in an overcrowded media environment, attention rarely follows careful argument but follows intensity. Statements that provoke outrage or disbelief travel further, stay longer, and draw more coverage, and for part of the audience, that same bluntness even reads as authenticity. Michał Krzyżanowski (2020) describes this as the "normalisation of the unsayable": repetition changes how language feels, and terms that once carried a strong shock begin to lose that force when they reappear in everyday political speech. The reappearance of dehumanising labels such as "vermin", with their heavy historical associations, marks a further step in that process. At that point, scandal no longer interrupts political communication — it becomes part of how it works.

In recent years, gaslighting has become part of political debate, not only a term for personal relationships (Sweet, 2019; Beerbohm & Davis, 2023). From a pragmatic angle, it helps to separate what an utterance does on the surface from what it actually produces (van Dijk, 2021): claims about "stolen elections", for instance,

do not aim to inform but work to stabilise an alternative political reality. The effects shift depending on who listens: supporters treat such statements as confirmation and a call to act; opponents react, often amplifying the message; those in between may disengage, worn down by repetition and contradiction. Across these cases, attention stays at the centre, what Jayson Harsin (2024) describes as the "weaponisation of media".

Strategies that mass-produce false or contradictory information rely on the cognitive limits of the audience: when the volume of messages exceeds people's ability to verify them, overload sets in, and people more often give up critical evaluation altogether (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Large-scale fact-checking does not always resolve this problem; in some cases, it works the other way around, as repeated corrections keep false claims visible and help them circulate further. Over time, familiarity replaces verification — false claims stop standing out as exceptional and settle into the background as just another version of events. At RAND Corporation, this drift is described as truth decay: a gradual erosion of the boundary between facts and opinions, alongside a decline in trust toward traditional sources of information.

Populist rhetoric activates strong emotions — fear, anger, pride — through constant hyperbole and the sharp division between "the people" and "the elite" (Moffitt, 2020). In this environment, manipulation no longer depends on concealment but operates through excess, repetition, and emotional pressure, with simulacra, metaphors, and frames constructing alternative realities in which facts lose their organising function.

Conclusions to Chapter 3

Chapter 3 traced the transition from scandal as a theoretical category to the specific conceptual units through which it is activated in practice. Building on A. M. Prykhodko's typology of concepts, six theme-generating concepts were identified that function as stable scandal triggers in the communication of Donald Trump and other figures of the Republican Party: MIGRANTS, TARIFFS, DEEP STATE, FAKE NEWS, CHINA, and MAGA. These concepts do more than describe social reality; they reshape it, recasting ordinary political topics as matters of threat, betrayal, or existential choice.

The scandal-generating function of these concepts operates through two relatively independent processes. The first is conceptual loading on the part of the speaker: MIGRANTS appear as an invasion, TARIFFS as an act of national defence, FAKE NEWS as an assault on truth. The second plays out within the mass media, where the same verbalised concepts are slotted into ready-made narrative scripts, including global conflict, authoritarian drift, economic crisis, and legal persecution. Formulations such as "We need STRENGTH and POWER to prevent World War Three" or "Except for day one... I'm not a dictator" remain open to several readings. Scandal emerges when the media fix one of these readings through selective quotation.

A separate layer concerns the linguo-conceptual foundations of manipulation. Here we are dealing with the artificial construction of reality through simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994), shock effects, and performative utterances (Austin, 1962). Under post-truth conditions, fact no longer serves as a point of reference: its place is taken by repetition, emotional engagement, and metaphor-based framing, most visibly NATION IS A BODY and SOCIETY IS A CONTAINER. From this dynamic comes what Krzyżanowski (2020) describes as the normalisation of the unsayable, a process through which statements that would have sounded unacceptable only a few years ago begin to circulate as routine political language. Chapter 4 re-examines the same concepts and scenarios across three levels, linguo-stylistic, linguo-rhetorical, and linguo-pragmatic, with the scandalous utterances themselves and their mass-media representations treated as separate but connected objects of analysis.

Chapter 4. Verbalization of English-Language POLITICAL SCANDAL in Electronic Mass Media

4.1. Linguo-Stylistics of "Scandalous Utterances"

Scandalous utterances in political discourse often rely on the deliberate crossing of communicative and ethical norms. Their effects go beyond what is explicitly said. In American politics, especially in the speech of Donald Trump and other figures associated with the populist wing of the Republican Party (2016–2020), such statements appear with notable regularity. In the politically polarised media landscape of 2021–2026, they are transforming from deviations into a deliberate communicative strategy (Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Moffitt, 2016).

The systematic use of pejoratives demonstrates a gradation of intensity: from politically charged epithets (corrupt prosecutors, radical left) to zoological metaphors (deep state parasites, rats leaving a sinking ship) and absolute dehumanisation (lunatics, demons in human form). This gradation can be linked to approaches to the escalation of hate speech, in which different types of pejorative vocabulary are viewed as successive levels of intensity. Dehumanisation represents one of the highest levels of such escalation and exacerbates the radicalisation of discourse (Wodak & Forchtner, 2018).

Phrases like "leading the charge", "fighting on the frontlines", or "enemy within" all draw on military language. This makes the metaphor POLITICS IS WAR easy to recognise. In this framing, political opponents are turned into internal enemies of the state, which can push discourse in a more radical direction (van Dijk, 2021).

Dehumanising metaphors are among the most controversial categories. In political discourse, they often rely on zoological imagery, for instance, when bureaucrats are described as "parasites" or linked to the "swamp". These metaphors connect ideas of state decline with purification and have appeared regularly in Donald Trump's rhetoric since 2016.

A defining feature of controversial utterances is the abundant use of negatively connoted vocabulary. In their book *Your Brain's Politics* (2016), Lakoff and Wehling analyse this as a framing strategy based on a moral dichotomy, whereby opponents are deprived of legitimacy through the linguistic construction of the image of the "immoral other". Ahmadian et al. (2017) found in a psycholinguistic study that Trump uses superlatives significantly more frequently than other US presidents, creating an effect of absolute exceptionalism in events, as in phrasings like "the most unfair prosecutions in American history", "the greatest injustice ever" and "total persecution".

This asymmetry shows up in the use of euphemisms for one's own actions and strongly negative language for opponents. A clearer view of "whitewashing" emerges from the Pete Hegseth case in late 2024, after reports about a non-disclosure agreement, sexual assault allegations and worries about alcohol abuse began to circulate. The Trump transition team replied through its spokesperson Steven

Cheung, who stayed firmly on the line of categorical denial: "Mr. Hegseth has vigorously denied any and all accusations, and no charges were filed... We look forward to his confirmation as United States Secretary of Defense so he can get started on Day One to Make America Safe and Great Again" (Cheung, cited in *The Washington Post*, 2024). Around this official statement, conservative media handled the allegations differently. Instead of using legal terms such as sexual misconduct or alcohol abuse, they reached for softer categories like "personal challenges", reinforced by the suggestive aside "who hasn't had them?" that shifts the discussion from the legal-ethical domain to that of universal human imperfection. The parallel dysphemism "fake news media" simultaneously discredits the sources of information, while temporal markers such as "ancient history" minimise the seriousness of events that took place only a few years earlier (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2021). POLITICS IS BUSINESS works similarly, reducing public administration to the logic of commercial decisions: "Running the government like a business — that's what we do. Bad deals? We cancel them. Underperforming employees? You fire them." The phrase 'You're fired!', known from *The Apprentice*, points to hyper-personalisation (Montgomery, 2020). It shifts attention from institutions to individual decisions and managerial styles.

A more extreme form of dehumanisation can be seen in the discourse of Marjorie Taylor Greene, where references to animals sometimes shift into explicitly religious language. In these cases, opponents are described as "demons" or as forces of evil that pose a threat to society. Rather than just criticising political rivals, this kind of rhetoric frames conflict in moral terms, as a struggle between good and evil. Calls to "expel" opponents then start to resemble symbolic acts of purification (Marzouki et al., 2016).

Political communication increasingly borrows from internet culture: slang and memes make messages feel direct and familiar (Zappavigna, 2012), while conversational syntax and grammatical informality produce an effect of authenticity (Clarke & Grieve, 2019).

One of the most noticeable patterns is anaphora. The repetition of the pronoun they gradually constructs a generalised image of the opponent while reinforcing a division between "us" and "them". For example, in the rhetoric of Donald Trump, statements such as "They want to destroy our country. They want to take away your speech. They are coming after me because I am fighting for you" appear regularly. Similar patterns can be observed in the rhetoric of JD Vance, where repetitions like "they" or "the elites" serve the same function. For instance, "They don't care about you. They care about their power." In such cases, complex political processes are reduced to a single, unified opponent, in line with patterns of polarisation discussed in CDA (Wodak, 2015; van Dijk, 2021).

Antithesis ("We're winning. They're losing") and hypophora ("The critics? Jealous") compress political complexity into binary oppositions: dialogue is simulated but foreclosed, and interpretation is pre-fixed.

The same logic operates at the level of naming. Institutional entities are replaced with simplified labels such as "bureaucrats", "Democrats", or "the radical

left". In a more explicit form, this appears in the rhetoric of Marjorie Taylor Greene, where such labels are combined with overtly negative evaluations. As a result, complex structures are presented as concrete and emotionally charged targets. This is not only simplification but also a form of delegitimation.

This connects to a broader pattern in how conceptual metaphors shape political argument. As George Lakoff (2016) argues, politics is often understood through familiar domains such as business or competition, where there are winners and losers, gains and losses.

At the level of speech acts, this discourse weaponises assertives. Claims like "These were the most unfair prosecutions in American history" are presented without evidence but with full certainty. Alongside them appear expressives framed as insults ("disgraceful witch hunt by radical left lunatics"), directives ("Time to call the exterminator"), and commissives ("We're draining the swamp").

These statements do not just describe reality, they impose it. The line between describing and constructing the world breaks down, which is central to post-truth discourse (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Grice's maxims are not simply violated; they are bent on purpose. Claims resist verification. Roles flip: prosecutors become "the real criminals". Repetition replaces argument: "disgraceful witch hunt". Relevance collapses as whataboutism drags the discussion away from the original issue; personal attacks take over, the topic shifts, language becomes deliberately vague, and paralipsis does the rest — accusations are hinted at, never fully stated. This is not accidental: it disorients, overloads, and forces the audience to choose a version of reality rather than evaluate it (Blassnig et al., 2020).

Impoliteness drives this logic further, not as a mistake but as a tactic. "Coward Republicans", "corrupt prosecutors", "parasites", "demons": these are not random insults but direct attacks on face, pushed to the limit with no softening and no distance. And this is exactly why it works. The absence of politeness reads as honesty; the aggression signals alignment with the audience rather than with institutions (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2021). The same expressions keep returning, but not as neutral repetitions: they harden into signals. "Witch hunt" is no longer an argument but a trigger. Something similar happens with memes: "DOGE" started as a joke but does not stay harmless when the same sign moves into political discourse — it can be taken seriously or dismissed as "just a meme", depending on what is convenient, and that flexibility is the point.

Platforms intensify this effect. Capitalisation on X is not just style, it functions like a digital shout, short, loud, and hard to ignore. Not built for argument. Built for interruption. At rallies, the same logic scales up: repetition locks phrases into memory, and the crowd completes them. Interviews follow a different pattern, breaking the question, shifting the topic, and moving on before anything settles. Persuasion here does not depend on being logically complete; it only needs to feel coherent enough. Add victimhood ("witch hunt", "persecution"), add anti-elite language ("corrupt prosecutors"), and the picture closes on itself.

Trump sets the dominant rhetorical tone, while Greene, Boebert, and Hegseth represent structurally distinct variants: Greene amplifies through moral absolutism

("demons", "spiritual warfare"), Hegseth through military authority and media confrontation, Boebert through instant visual impact designed for platform circulation.

By 2026, X and Truth Social form a shared ecosystem in which repeated phrases set frames rather than arguments, and meme-labels such as "DOGE" migrate from political language into institutional logic.

Scandalous language in this discourse does not emerge as noise; it works as a tool. When allies face accusations, the wording softens ("personal challenges", "old news"); when opponents appear, the tone flips instantly ("parasites", "demons", "corrupt prosecutors"). This is not random aggression but a redrawing of the field: one side stays human, the other does not. The same logic runs through syntax. Sentences do not "become shorter" by accident — they are cut down into fragments such as "TOTAL EXONERATION", "WITCH HUNT", "STOP THE STEAL", which function as blows rather than arguments: quick, repeatable, hard to ignore, leaving no room for nuance.

At this point, truth itself stops being the main concern; what matters is control of the frame. Calling prosecutors "the real criminals" does not try to prove anything — it flips the direction of accusation. The message does not need verification; it needs circulation. Repeated often enough, "witch hunt" no longer describes a situation but authorises a response to it; the same shift becomes even clearer with "DOGE", where what started as a joke hardened into a label, and from there into something operating with administrative weight. Language no longer just reflects political conflict; it prepares it, clearing space for decisions that would otherwise look extreme. This is what Ott and Dickinson (2019) call the politics of debasement: lowering the level of discourse is not a side effect but the method.

4.2. Linguo-Stylistics of Mass Media Representations of "Scandalous Utterances"

In the American political discourse of 2022–2024, what is at stake is not so much factual accuracy as narrative dominance: which version of events gains traction and becomes established. Trump's phrase 'very fine people' regarding the events in Charlottesville is telling. On paper, it is a simple sentence, but in practice, it has become one of the most quoted passages of political discourse. In some reports, the quote was presented in an abridged form alongside footage of neo-Nazi marches, and the conclusion arose almost automatically. In other cases, the full transcript was reproduced, with an emphasis on the fact that Trump had separately condemned "neo-Nazis and white nationalists". The same sentence, two different interpretations. A telling moment came in June 2024, when Snopes reassessed the long-running claim about "very fine people" and rated it false, pointing out that Trump had, in the same statement, condemned the neo-Nazis and white supremacists outright (Snopes, 2024). Far from settling anything, this fact-check pushed the debate further. Trump's campaign immediately picked up on the ruling during the June debate, and critics pushed back, accusing Snopes of stripping away the wider rhetorical force of "very

fine people on both sides" (Time, 2024). What followed was, briefly, a controversy about the controversy itself, with fact-checking pulled into the dispute it was meant to resolve.

The same dynamic plays out in much smaller episodes. Take the 27 June 2024 debate between Biden and Trump. Biden mixed up two figures, saying insulin had been brought down "to \$15 for an insulin shot, as opposed to \$400", and corrected himself to \$35 only in his closing remarks (KFF Health News, 2024). One reading was that he simply tripped over a number. Another framed the same slip as a sign of cognitive decline, and the two readings barely overlapped. Trump's claims about crime moved along a parallel track. Some outlets cross-checked them against FBI Uniform Crime Reporting data and called them false (PolitiFact, 2024); others left the figures alone and turned the conversation toward how the FBI gathers crime data in the first place. The pattern is recognisable across these cases. Identical material does not produce variants of a single story so much as separate realities built out of the same words.

This dynamic is clearly evident in Biden's speech outside Independence Hall in September 2022, which almost instantly ceased to be merely a speech and became a media event. Biden himself structured his speech around the idea of a threat to democracy, distinguishing between 'MAGA Republicans' and other conservatives, and calling on Americans to 'confront extremists'. However, within a matter of hours, the key argument about "MAGA Republicans" as a threat to the foundations of the republic had been taken out of context, cherry-picked and spun in opposite directions. In some reports, it sounded like a warning of a real danger; in others, like an attack on tens of millions of voters. The Republicans' reaction reinforced precisely this second interpretation: even before the speech itself, Kevin McCarthy demanded an apology from Biden for "slandering" millions of Americans and effectively set the frame within which the address was read as a political attack rather than an address to the nation. The staging also played its part. The red and blue lighting of the façade was intended to look solemn and presidential, but within a few hours that same backdrop was interpreted as either patriotic symbolism or something far darker. The phrase "blood red" took hold. At this stage, the visuals were no longer merely accompanying the speech, but were driving it.

Whilst the previous examples illustrated how framing works at the level of individual episodes, at the level of language itself, the same mechanism operates in an even more subtle way. Descriptions of Trump's rhetoric, for instance, rarely strike a middle ground: it is either 'outrageous', 'refreshingly honest', 'dangerous' or 'necessary'. The space between these poles is almost non-existent, and once labels are fixed, they no longer merely describe but predetermine how the audience should react. Even minor linguistic details carry weight, and reporting verbs are a telling example. To say that someone 'claimed' something is to immediately create distance; to say that the same person 'explained' it has the opposite effect. Such choices are not neutral, and over time they accumulate to the point where the speaker appears unreliable or credible even before their argument is analysed. The same applies to the tone of certainty: some statements are presented as settled facts ("Trump lied

about crime statistics"), whilst others are softened by phrases such as "appears to contradict", "some suggest", "may have been taken out of context". This determines whether the text invites the reader to engage in discussion or dictates a ready-made conclusion.

Headlines take all this and take it to a whole new level. They don't just report; they perform. Politics begins to look less like governance and more like a non-stop series of clashes: someone 'unleashes', someone else 'slams', something 'explodes'. This kind of language spreads faster, generates more clicks and holds people's attention. Regardless of the specific case, the same frames keep reappearing – such as "threat to democracy", "cognitive decline", "fake news", "out of context" – and they function as cognitive shortcuts: as soon as a statement falls within one of them, the bulk of the interpretation has already been done for the reader. Certain concepts make this system even less transparent. The idea of the "dog whistle" allows journalists to claim that meaning exists beneath the surface of the text, and whilst this can be analytically useful, it can easily devolve into attributing intentions without clear evidence.

A clear pattern emerges when these cases are analysed collectively. The same material can function within different narrative frameworks without altering the original quotation. In one version, institutions and journalists defend the truth, whilst a political actor undermines it. In another, that same actor turns out to be the only one speaking out about what others are not saying, whilst the media are portrayed as manipulative. The roles may change, but the structure itself remains constant. These transformations are not random; they rely on typical techniques, including the omission of caveats, the reintroduction of previous statements into new contexts, the variation of the level of responsibility, and the gradual imbuing of neutral terms with emotional connotations, as a result of which they lose their neutrality. Each of these techniques may go unnoticed on its own, but taken together, they alter the meaning of the message. The same statement begins to function differently depending on where it appears and within which frame it is presented. In such a configuration, the question of what was 'actually' said loses its analytical value: it presupposes the existence of a quotation outside the frame, whereas the frame is an integral part of how the statement becomes a public fact in the first place.

4.3. Linguo-Rhetoric of "Scandalous Utterances"

Scandalous statements in political discourse can no longer be adequately characterised as deviations from communicative norms. They have become constitutive of how the system operates. In the current media environment, provocation is not a breakdown of communication but closer to its default mode: what matters now is staying visible, and visibility does not reward consistency but impact. Being ignored is worse than being wrong, so statements shift accordingly. The aim is no longer to explain things, or even to persuade in the traditional sense, but to trigger a reaction that keeps circulating. You can see it in how certain phrases stick. When Donald Trump repeats "witch hunt" or "total exoneration", the question

of whether the claim holds up becomes secondary. The repetition does the work, and after enough cycles the phrase begins to feel like a stable version of events simply because it has not gone away.

Once this threshold is crossed, it no longer rests solely on what is said explicitly. It shifts into the realm of implication and group identity. When JD Vance referred to some women as "childless cat ladies", the phrase was not merely offensive; it drew a line, defining who was inside the political community and who was outside it. The reaction to the remark did not neutralise it but rather amplified it. Democrats and public figures such as Jennifer Aniston condemned the phrase as misogynistic; polls showed that 64% of Americans disagreed with the implied thesis; yet Vance himself returned to it at least twice, first through his wife, who called the remark a "quip", and then personally, describing it as a "sarcastic remark". However, every attempt at contextualisation only embedded the phrase more deeply in public discourse. It became a meme, a marker of identity, something that could either be appropriated or rejected, with both gestures functioning as a political signal. The phrase itself, meanwhile, no longer depended on what Vance had meant. Its function was determined by which side of the divide it placed the speaker.

This is where scandal changes function. It no longer interrupts political communication; it sustains it. Repetition trains audiences to process provocation faster, react more predictably, and eventually stop registering it as exceptional. What once required justification begins to operate without it. That shift produces a paradox that defines the current moment: the more aggressively norms are broken, the easier it becomes to claim the role of restoring order, not despite the disruption, but through it. Provocation starts to read as clarity, aggression as honesty.

Scandal in contemporary political discourse is not accidental: political actors manufacture it, test it, and then scale it. Claims about a "stolen" 2020 election did not survive because they were credible; they survived because key figures repeated them until they no longer needed evidence. The claim stopped functioning as a statement and turned into a signal: you either accept it and belong or reject it and place yourself outside the group. Actors like Ron DeSantis push this further by inflating cultural conflicts into existential threats: "woke ideology" is not presented as a policy disagreement but as a civilisational attack. The language does not describe a problem; it enlarges it until compromise looks like surrender. Once the scale shifts, moderation becomes politically useless. These strategies depend on constant reinforcement: binary oppositions, security versus chaos, people versus elites, are repeated until they begin to structure perception itself, and complexity disappears not because it is resolved, but because it is no longer usable.

Figures such as Elon Musk do not just "appeal" to free speech; they repurpose it. "Free speech absolutism" becomes a shield that protects amplification without responsibility: it allows actors to flood the space, dominate visibility, and frame any restriction as censorship. Humour pushes this logic to its limit. In 2026, it no longer softens political conflict, it carries it. Labelling a statement as a joke does not neutralise it; it protects it, and critics are left arguing with something that can always retreat into "just sarcasm". The D.O.G.E. phenomenon makes this visible in its most

extreme form: what began as a meme has moved into institutional space and now operates with administrative consequences. At that point, scandal stops functioning as a disruption and becomes infrastructure, something politics runs on rather than something politics produces.

Cultural and ideological filters define the boundaries of what is perceived as acceptable provocative speech. In the United States, where political polarisation is particularly pronounced, these boundaries diverge sharply between groups: what one side interprets as legitimate political expression, the other regards as harmful or exclusionary. The case of the phrase "Your body, my choice", launched by Nick Fuentes on election night in November 2024, illustrates this divide. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD, 2024), Fuentes's post garnered over 90 million views and more than 35,000 reposts within days of the November 2024 election, while ISD recorded a 4,600% increase in mentions of the phrase on X within 24 hours of the election results (CNN, 2024). The phrase migrated rapidly from the digital sphere into offline contexts: the Stevens Point School District in Wisconsin issued a warning to parents that students were directing the phrase at female classmates (Hirsbrunner, cited in CNN, 2024). In the same period, posts on X calling for the repeal of the 19th Amendment — which guarantees women the right to vote — rose by 663% compared with the previous week (ISD, 2024).

What was presented in one context as "trolling" or irony was read in another as a direct signal about the limits of citizenship.

Controversial statements in contemporary American political discourse tend to fall into several recurring categories. Racist and xenophobic rhetoric, particularly narratives drawing on the "Great Replacement" theory — a conspiracy framework documented by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL, n.d.) as having migrated from white-nationalist subcultures to mainstream conservative media — has gained traction on high-rated cable broadcasts, most prominently Tucker Carlson's prime-time programme on Fox News, which the ADL formally called on the network to cancel in April 2021 over its repeated invocation of replacement narratives (Greenblatt, 2021). Sexist and misogynistic rhetoric appears with no less regularity, particularly regarding female politicians: public attacks on figures such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Ilhan Omar often go beyond substantive disagreement and take on a personalised, gendered form. This also includes a category that became particularly prominent after the 2024 election, ranging from JD Vance's comments about "childless cat ladies" to Donald Trump's remark that he would protect women, "whether they like it or not". Attacks on opponents and institutions vary in their framing: at one end of the spectrum are direct ad hominem insults; at the other, broader attempts to undermine institutional legitimacy through the claim that the FBI, the Department of Justice or the judicial system have been "weaponised" against conservatives. Alongside this, conspiracy narratives circulate online, ranging from QAnon and the "deep state" to references to "cultural Marxism", whose scandalous power lies not so much in the formulations themselves as in the gap between them and verifiable evidence. A distinctive pattern involves demonstrative rejection of political correctness, that is, the deliberate use of language that runs

counter to progressive norms, such as refusing to use preferred pronouns or framing diversity initiatives as "reverse discrimination". This pattern is clearly visible in the debates in Florida and Texas between 2022 and 2024 surrounding laws restricting the teaching of critical race theory.

From a functional perspective, controversial statements rarely serve a single purpose. They tend to overlap, even when one effect dominates. In some cases, they act as a distraction: when federal prosecutors charged Donald Trump in the classified documents case in June 2023, neither he nor his allies lingered long on the legal details, instead reverting to familiar tropes about political persecution and a partisan 'witch hunt'. In other cases, the same vocabulary serves a mobilising function, as demonstrated by the rhetoric about an 'invasion' on the southern border: it does not describe the situation, but transforms the discussion of policy into a matter of threat and urgency. Not every provocative statement is the result of calculation. Some of them appear reactive or even impulsive, particularly in the fast-paced online environment. However, once a phrase enters circulation, it begins to function independently of its original intent: labels such as "un-American", "communist" or "groomer" exclude the target from the bounds of acceptable political participation, and the effect remains the same, namely exclusion.

Conclusions to Chapter 4

Chapter 4 examined controversial statements in American political discourse at three levels: the linguo-stylistic level within the statements themselves, the linguo-stylistic level in mass media representations, and the linguo-rhetorical level. This distinction between the utterances themselves and their media presentation revealed that the meaning of a scandalous phrase is not formed at the moment it is uttered, but during its circulation.

At the linguistic-stylistic level, scandalous utterances rely on a recognisable repertoire of devices: pejoratives of increasing intensity (from "corrupt prosecutors" through "parasites" to "demons in human form"), asymmetrical moral judgement (euphemisms for allies, dysphemisms for opponents), conceptual metaphors such as POLITICS IS WAR and POLITICS IS BUSINESS, and meme-based codification such as "DOGE" and "WITCH HUNT". In media representations, this stylistic approach does not disappear but is restructured: the choice between "claimed" and "explained", headline formulas, and recurring frames such as "threat to democracy" or "cognitive decline" function as cognitive shortcuts in which the bulk of the interpretation has already been done for the reader.

At the linguo-pragmatic level, the analysis revealed systematic violations of Gricean maxims as a deliberate rhetorical strategy, producing implicatures that resist verification while retaining plausible deniability.

At the linguistic level, the analysis confirmed a shift in scandalous communication from an exceptional to a normative status. The repeated phrases "witch hunt" and "total exoneration" derive their power not from their content, but from the very act of repetition; claims of a "stolen" 2020 election function as signals

of group affiliation; "Your body, my choice" and "childless cat ladies" delineate the boundaries of the political community, and every attempt at contextualisation only embeds the phrase more deeply into public discourse. The same statement can simultaneously distract, mobilise and exclude, depending on the frame in which it is presented.

The analysis shows that the controversial statement functions as a hybrid linguistic construct, where stylistic selection, rhetorical strategy and media representation operate as a single mechanism, and the gap that opens up between what is said and what remains in circulation belongs to the structure of scandal as a communicative genre, not to its accidents.

Conclusions and Perspectives for Further Research

The aim of this study was to identify the linguistic, rhetorical and pragmatic mechanisms through which political utterances acquire scandalous force in media circulation, and to describe how an utterance changes when it travels from the speaker to media coverage. The analysis carried out in Chapters 1–4 supports the working hypothesis: scandalous force is not a property of the utterance alone but emerges from the interaction between three layers — the linguistic organisation of the utterance, the framing choices made in media representations, and the platform dynamics that govern its circulation. None of these layers, taken on its own, is sufficient to explain why a particular statement turns into a scandal.

Several findings deserve specific attention. The first concerns the structural status of scandalous speech. The empirical material from 2020 to 2026 shows that scandalous utterances no longer function as breaches of communicative norms but as a recurrent register of mainstream political language. Pejorative gradation from corrupt prosecutors through deep state parasites to demons in human form, asymmetrical moral evaluation through paired euphemisms and dysphemisms, conceptual metaphors of the type POLITICS IS WAR and POLITICS IS BUSINESS, and meme-like coding such as DOGE or WITCH HUNT operate as a stable inventory rather than as exceptional rhetorical choices. The recurrence of these resources across speakers as different as Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Greene, JD Vance, Pete Hegseth and Lauren Boebert suggests that they belong to the discursive register itself and not only to individual styles.

The second finding concerns what happens to an utterance once it enters mediated circulation. The comparative analysis confirms that decontextualisation followed by recontextualisation in a new frame is the central transformative mechanism. The same words can take on opposite illocutionary profiles depending on which fragment is foregrounded, which is dropped, and what visual and narrative material accompanies the quotation. Trump's "very fine people" remark, his "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by" address, and Biden's Independence Hall speech demonstrate this in different ways but follow the same logic. The interpretive divergence is not produced by the utterances themselves but by the editorial and

stylistic decisions of the outlets that report them. Reporting verbs such as claim and explain, headline frames such as threat to democracy, cognitive decline, fake news and out of context, the choice of accompanying still images, and the foregrounding of specific lexical items all carry interpretive weight that often outweighs the original wording.

The third finding concerns the rhetorical economy of scandal. Scandalous utterances rarely perform a single function. Trump's witch hunt formula in the context of the classified documents indictment, the invasion rhetoric on the southern border, Vance's childless cat ladies and Fuentes's *Your body, my choice* show that the same utterance can simultaneously distract, mobilise and exclude. Reactions that seem to challenge such utterances often amplify them: criticism reproduces the formulation and brings it back into circulation, and contextualising attempts only embed the phrase more deeply in public discourse. Once a phrase enters circulation, it tends to operate independently of its original intent, and labels such as un-American, communist or groomer place the addressee outside the bounds of legitimate political participation.

The fourth finding concerns the interaction between theme-generating concepts and scandalous scenarios. The six concepts identified in Chapter 3 — MIGRANTS, TARIFFS, FAKE NEWS, DEEP STATE, CHINA and MAGA — function as triggers around which broader scandalous scenarios are organised. The Springfield episode of September 2024, in which an unverified claim about Haitian immigrants moved from a viral Facebook post to a presidential debate and produced bomb threats and school evacuations, illustrates how a single utterance activates the MIGRANTS concept, mobilises pre-existing cognitive frames, and reorganises the public discussion around the axis of threat and protection. The persistence of such claims even after factual debunking confirms the relevance of the illusory truth effect (Fazio et al., 2015) and supports Wodak's account of shameless normalisation.

These findings carry implications beyond the specific cases analysed. Scandalous utterances are best understood not as ruptures of normal political communication but as a genre of strategic communication with its own conventions, lexical inventory and circulation logic. Treating them as deviations underestimates their structural role. The methodological consequence is that the linguistic study of political scandal cannot remain at the level of the utterance: it has to follow the utterance into its mediated forms and account for the framing decisions that intervene between speaker and audience.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The empirical material is restricted to English-language sources, and the analysis does not extend to non-Anglophone media coverage. The selection of cases follows the principle of theoretical richness rather than statistical representativeness. Platform-level material from X, TikTok and Reddit was used selectively, and the affective dimension of audience reactions was not analysed in depth. These limitations point directly to the directions in which the work could be extended.

Several lines of further research follow from the present study. The first is comparative. The mechanisms identified here could be tested against material from

other political systems, both within Anglophone media environments and beyond them, to determine which mechanisms are genre-specific and which are tied to the features of American politics. The second concerns digital platforms as discursive environments. The role of algorithmic visibility, the speed of circulation and the architecture of reposting and quotation deserve more systematic empirical attention, and the role of artificial intelligence in generating, amplifying and detecting scandalous utterances is an emerging dimension that linguistic research has so far engaged with only marginally. The third concerns audience participation. A fuller account would analyse how audiences themselves contribute to the construction of scandal discourse through comments, reposts, parodies and memes, particularly in relation to affective polarisation. The fourth concerns longitudinal analysis. A longer historical view, comparing the rhetorical features of contemporary scandalous discourse with earlier periods such as Watergate or the Clinton impeachment, would clarify what is genuinely new in the post-2020 environment and what represents the intensification of pre-existing patterns.

Beyond academic research, the findings have practical implications. For media literacy, the study offers a framework for analysing how the same utterance is reshaped by different outlets and why fact-checking alone rarely settles the interpretive disputes that scandalous utterances generate. For journalism, the analysis of reporting verbs, headline frames and visual framing as carriers of interpretive weight invites a more reflexive practice of representation.

The study does not treat political scandal as a closed object but as a field of ongoing discursive work in which speakers, journalists, platforms and audiences negotiate the terms of legitimate political communication. Its central claim, that scandalous force emerges from the interaction of linguistic, rhetorical and circulatory factors rather than from any one of them in isolation, invites further empirical refinement and theoretical extension.

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