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***MILLIONS AND MILLIONS OF PEOPLE POURING IN:
A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF MIGRANTS'
REPRESENTATION AND THE ANTI-MIGRANT POSTURE
IN TRUMP'S SPEECH***

Abstract: This study offers a critical and multimodal discourse analysis of Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric during the final weeks of the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign. Drawing on a corpus of 135 annotated video clips totalling 180 minutes and primarily sourced from the X platforms *TheWarRoom* and *The Blazen* – the analysis investigates how discursive, rhetorical, and gestural strategies construct a consistent anti-migrant posture. The study reveals that Trump deploys a combination of dehumanizing metaphors, militarized language, and emotionally charged narrative elements to frame migrants as existential threats. Through repetition, hyperbole, and generalization, his discourse reinforces ideological polarization and normalizes extreme political responses. Migrants are systematically portrayed as criminals, invaders, and carriers of disease, while Trump's use of gesture – particularly beats, deictic pointing, and eyebrow raises—further intensifies the rhetorical impact of his claims. The conflation of terms such as “asylum seekers”, “illegal immigrants”, and “criminals” adds to a climate of confusion and fear, amplified by selective references to statistical data. The study concludes that Trump's multimodal discourse contributes not only to legitimizing harsh immigration policies but also to shaping public affect and political identity through the strategic mobilization of fear. This research thus illustrates the rhetorical power of populist discourse in constructing socially divisive narratives under the guise of national defense.

Key-words: Trump, anti-immigration stance, corpus, 2024 campaign, political speech

1. Introduction

In 2024, Trump's anti-immigration stance remained a central theme in his speeches. This study aims, from a critical and multimodal discourse analysis perspective, to examine the discursive strategies and methods used by the Republican candidate. It focuses on the various linguistic and discursive tools that

reinforce the recurring themes and imagery employed by Trump and analyzes how these elements contribute to constructing his anti-migrant posture.

The speeches analyzed are those delivered by the candidate himself, exclusively addressing the theme of immigration. The analysis covers the period from October 1, 2024, to the day of the presidential election, corresponding to the final weeks of the campaign. The dataset consists of 135 video clips totalling 180 minutes. These clips are primarily sourced from the social media platform X. The two accounts involved are *TheWarRoom*, which is explicitly pro-Trump, and *The Blaze*, which presents itself as a more neutral news and media platform.¹ Every day, each video that was published on the two accounts was watched and only those dealing with the topic of immigration were selected for the corpus. The speeches were then manually annotated so as to provide both a quantitative and qualitative analysis.

I will first examine the different ways migrants are named and represented in Trump's speeches, before discussing the rhetorical strategies employed by the candidate at the time to promote his anti-immigration stance.

2. The naming and representation of migrants

2.1. Metaphors and images

Trump's rhetoric on immigration is marked by strong associations between migrants and various threats – some of which rely on well-established tropes, while others are more novel. A key example is the link he draws between migrants and crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism, which serves to portray them as inherently dangerous individuals.

(1) She's imported *an army of illegal alien gang members and migrant criminals* from the dungeons of the Third World, they come from the dungeons of the Third World. Many many are *prisoners*, many are—some had *death sentences*, they were gonna be executed for *murder*.² (10/13)

(2) Today I make you this promise I will liberate Wisconsin and our entire nation from this *mass migration invasion of murderers, child predators, drug dealers, gang members and thugs*. (10/6)

Similarly, he frames immigration as an epidemic threat that might echo the COVID period:

(3) I will bring back Title 42, *medical rejections* – people come in, they're *very sick, very sick* they'll come into our country, they're *very very very sick* with *highly contagious disease*, and they let into our country to *infect* our country. And they're coming in numbers nobody's ever seen before. (10/11)

(4) And the corrupt media is outraged that I keep talking about migrant crime and *the migrant crime epidemic*. (10/1)

¹ “The official War Room account of President Donald J. Trump's political operation. This account punches back 47x harder.” – description of TheWarRoom on X (<https://x.com/trumpwarroom>).

² Emphasis in the examples added by the author.

Beyond criminality and disease, Trump also employs dehumanizing language, likening migrants to animals and violent predators:

- (5) Once again, this *animal* had arrived at our border and was released into the United States by Kamala Harris. (10/11)
- (6) To expedite the removal of these *savage gangs*, and I will invoke the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, think of that. (10/11)
- (7) She's resettled them into your communities, congratulations! And, they can now *prey on* innocent Americans for a while. (10/13)
- (8) These are *animals*. (10/13)
- (9) Three days ago, I was in the small town of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin where an illegal alien member of a savage Venezuelan Prison gang from Kamala who let them in to the country *and this vicious and savage* was arrested this month. (10/1)
- (10) I'm outraged that Kamala released into America the *predator* who murdered Laken-Riley; [...] I'm outraged that she let in the *savage* who raped and murdered Rachel Morin. (10/1)

Comparing migrants to animals serves as a dehumanizing strategy used to justify the anti-immigration posture as well as the political response.

Trump also uses the image of an overwhelming, uncontrollable influx of migrants, which is further reinforced through metaphors of flooding, contagion, and invasion:

- (11) Now let me tell you what is happening at the border because it's a fact and you, probably more than anybody else, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, people are *pouring in* and taking your jobs. (10/12)
- (12) When I win on November 5th, the *migrant invasion* ends, and the restoration of our country begins. (10/12)
- (13) We're gonna stop *the people from pouring into our border*. (10/2)
- (14) With four more years for Kamala, *she'd flood every Michigan's small town and midwestern city with illegal migrants* from the most dangerous places on Earth. (10/3)
- (15) They're just releasing them in, *like water coming into the country*. I wish it was just water. (10/4)

It is interesting to note that though this image of flooding is not new, it fits Trump's construction of his anti-immigration posture – as Ahmed (2014, p.46) states, “[w]ords like ‘flood’ and ‘swamped’ are used, which create associations between asylum and the loss of control and hence work by mobilising fear, or the anxiety of being overwhelmed by the actual or potential proximity of others”.

2.2. The mental health question

On a different level, Trump repeatedly conflates two distinct meanings of the word asylum: one referring to the legal protection granted to individuals fleeing persecution, and the other to mental health institutions. This rhetorical slippage assimilates asylum seekers with individuals confined to psychiatric facilities, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes, and contributes to a broader climate of anxiety and hostility surrounding immigration.

Trump thus establishes a controversial and stigmatizing association by employing language that links immigration to mental instability. He goes so far as to claim that foreign governments are deliberately sending individuals with mental health issues to the United States, asserting, for example, that:

(16) For four straight years, she's imported an army of illegal alien gang members and migrant criminals from the dungeons all over the world. Not, not South America, all over the world they come. From prisons and jails, *insane asylums, mental institutions*. (10/13)

Trump frames asylum seekers not as vulnerable individuals in need of protection, but as mentally unwell people, thereby delegitimizing their claims to asylum. By merging the figure of the asylum seeker with that of the mentally ill, he constructs a narrative that undermines humanitarian obligations.

According to Time,³ this narrative may be rooted in a longer history of American political discourse, dating back to the 1980s Mariel boatlift,⁴ during which Cuban refugees were similarly portrayed as mentally ill and criminal. However, it was later proven that only a portion of them fit those descriptions.⁵ Referring to the *Marielitos* also serves as a means of gaining public support for Trump's portrayal of migrants, since at the time a vast majority of U.S. citizens disapproved of the Cuban settlement.

A recurring reference in Trump's rhetoric is Hannibal Lecter, the fictional, mentally unstable serial killer created by Thomas Harris – further implying that he equates migrants with individuals suffering from severe mental illness:

(17) She has [...] unleashed an army of gangs and criminal migrants from prisons and jails, from *insane asylums, and mental institutions*. You know who comes from *the insane asylums*? You know who it is, right? They always give me a hard time. *Hannibal Lecter, the great Hannibal Lecter*... you know the press to show you how bad they are... I'm talking about *insane asylums*, and then I'm talking about *Hannibal Lecter* – a little lighthearted humor about an unfunny subject. And they always go "He always brings up *Hannibal Lecter*. What does that have to do?" It has to do with the fact that these are the kind of people coming into our country from *insane asylums!* (11/2)

(18) So, they're coming in, many are coming in from jails and prisons and *mental institutions, insane asylums, that's like, you know, a step above, right, insane asylum*. And whenever I go, *Hannibal Lecter*, you know what I'm talking about. [...] They're here, you say "*Hannibal Lecter*, why would he mention-" well, you know why? Because *he was a sick puppy, and we have sick puppies coming into our country*. (10/15)

Hart (2010,p. 58) states that "[a]ctionyms like 'asylum-seekers' and anthroponyms like 'immigrants' and 'foreigners' [...] distinguish[ing] the 'non-native' from the 'native' population". Such discursive strategies serve not only

³ <https://time.com/7006684/trump-asylum-mariel-history/>

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mariel-boatlift>

⁵ "Although Castro sent some who were criminals or mentally ill, most of the Marielitos were seeking relief from political repression and a stagnating economy" <https://time.com/4888381/immigration-act-mariel-boatlift-history/>

to delegitimize migrants but also to evoke fear among Trump's supporters, encouraging them to perceive migration as a threat to national security and social order. Indeed, these strategies of de-spatialisation and dissimulation (Hart, 2010, p. 58) present immigrants as "different from or unfamiliar to the in-group", therefore becoming a common enemy.

2.3. A common enemy

By framing immigrants as invaders against whom insiders must mobilize, Trump portrays the United States as a besieged homeland under attack from outsiders. He constructs a common enemy as the primary threat through the use of war-related language and the dehumanization of migrants, ultimately presenting deportation as the only viable solution.

A central feature of Trump's immigration discourse is the construction of a stark binary opposition between "us" and "them". This division serves both to consolidate in-group identity and to dehumanize the out-group, stripping it of individuality and moral standing. This strategy is especially evident in his repeated use of personal pronouns to delineate belonging:

(19) He's looking for interpreters because they don't speak the language of... you and you and everybody in this room (10/11)

In this example, "you and you and everybody in this room" are portrayed as the legitimate, unified American public, in contrast to the nameless and faceless outsiders who "don't speak the language." As Ahmed (2014, p. 2) states, "the 'you' implicitly evokes a 'we', a group of subjects who can identify themselves with the injured nation." Hart (2010, pp. 56-57) explains that "the construction of an out-group presupposes the construction of an in-group", even if the latter "is often left implicit for the text-consumer to infer". In the following example, the two groups are explicitly identified:

(20) They came from mental institutions and insane asylums, and they came from terrorists' camps where they train them to come into the United States. And they come into the United States, many many terrorists. We have more terrorists coming into the United States in the last three years than we have had in the last thirty years. And these are the real terrorists, these are the real ones. We have no idea who they are. They let them come in. (10/1)

This use of pronouns emphasizes social division and exclusion while reinforcing an idealized, homogeneous national "we". Migrants, by contrast, are routinely referred to as an undifferentiated mass – "they"⁶ – and are stripped of individual identities. Trump states:

⁶ "Third person plural pronouns 'they' and 'them' are exclusive of both speaker and addressee. They therefore construct an out-group relative to the discourse participants, who are further inferred as belonging to the same social in-group" (Hart, 2010, p. 59).

(21) They have no idea who these people are, where they come from, where they're going. (10/4)

The erasure of migrant subjectivity is central to constructing them as legitimate targets of state-led security actions and to reinforcing the moral righteousness of the in-group's protective stance.

Depersonalization of the enemy is a common right-wing strategy: creating an anonymous, unidentified, and non-identifiable enemy fosters the belief that this disembodied threat is everywhere and could strike at any time (Mannoni, 2024, p. 95).

Trump's immigration rhetoric is also steeped in the language of war, mobilizing his audience around the image of a common enemy and framing migrants as hostile invaders who threaten to destabilize the nation. Through repeated use of martial and militarized vocabulary, he constructs a narrative in which the U.S. is portrayed as an endangered country that must be defended and liberated—and presents himself as the only person capable of doing so:

(22) We will close the border, we will stop the invasion of illegals into our country. We will *defend our territory, we will not be conquered, we will not be conquered! We will reclaim our sovereignty* and Colorado will vote for Trump as a protest and signal to the world that we are not going to take it anymore! We're not gonna take it anymore. I will *liberate Colorado* » (10/11)

(23) And anyone who would import criminal gangs to occupy America – we're not gonna be *occupied* by anybody, cannot ask to be president of this country. Anyone who orchestrated an invasion of America cannot lead America. (10/13)

(24) And we will call it "*Operation Aurora*" that's what we're going to – in honor of the people that have suffered in Aurora, at hands of this horrible gang, *Operation Aurora*. (10/13)

Here the noun phrase "*Operation Aurora*" is used to evoke a military operation, such as *Operation Enduring Freedom* for example.

(25) So I will rescue Arizona, and every town across America that has been *invaded* and *conquered*, they've been *conquered*, they're conquering the towns (10/13)

(26) I will send in federal law enforcement to *liberate every Midwestern town* that has been taken over by migrant gangs and criminal alien thugs. (10/1)

(27) And we're not allowing these people to *invade* us, to *conquer* us. (10/6)

(28) The United States is now an *occupied country*. But on November 5th, 2024, that'll be *liberation day* in America, *liberation day*. (10/16)

These statements frame immigration as an act of war and position Trump as a military leader in charge of rescuing the nation.

(29) So for the sake of our families, for the sake of our children, we will keep on going and as the expression goes, I mean, I'm a little embarrassed to say it to be honest with you, but we're gonna say it because a lot of people do said, *we will fight! Fight! Fight! In a fight for our country. We're gonna fight for our country.* (10/6)

By employing phrases like the one in (29), Trump transforms civic participation into a form of combat, appealing to patriotism and encouraging his supporters to

see themselves as soldiers in a struggle for national survival. As Musolff (2024) states, war metaphors “typically justify drastic political measures, invite strong emotional identification and loyalty in an ‘us-vs.-them’ schema.” In Trump’s rhetoric, immigration is not merely framed as a policy issue, but as an urgent security crisis that legitimizes aggressive responses under the guise of national defense and patriotic duty. Indeed, he evokes apocalyptic imagery to heighten the sense of crisis:

(30) But they are illegal immigrants as far as I’m concerned. *They’re destroying the town, they’re destroying the whole, they’ll end up destroying the state.* We cannot let this happen. (10/9)

He then presents the response to immigration as a large-scale national security operation:

(31) On that same day we will begin *the task of finding and deporting every single illegal alien gang member from our country, we’ll get them out.* (10/11).

(32) We will send elite squads of I.C.E, border patrol and federal law enforcement officers to *hunt down, arrest and deport every last illegal alien gang member* until there is not a single one left in this country. (10/11)

(33) And we will begin *the largest deportation operation* in the history of the United States. (10/11)

Through this warlike rhetoric, Trump constructs migration as an existential threat to American society, justifying extreme measures in response. It intensifies fear and polarization, and fosters an “us versus them” mentality that aligns with populist⁷ strategies of constructing a unified national identity against an external, vilified threat.

3. Discursive and rhetorical strategies to construct an anti-migrant position

3.1. Repetitions, hyperboles and exaggeration

Repetition plays a central stylistic and strategic role in Trump’s immigration rhetoric—just as it does in his overall discourse. As Scafalni (2024, p. 3) explains, “Trump’s extensive use of repetition has been described as a substitute for substantive explanations.” In the context of immigration, repetition is particularly effective in constructing migrants as threats and amplifying a sense of crisis.

⁷ Populism is here defined as being “organised around a horizontal axis and a vertical axis with the concept of ‘the people’ at the centre (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). On the horizontal axis, ‘the people’ are distinguished from Others who are not of ‘the people’ (e.g. foreigners) and who pose a threat to ‘the people’. On the vertical axis, ‘the people’ are distinguished from an elite and supposedly corrupt political class who fail to put the interests of ‘the people’ first and who have failed in dealing with the threat posed by the Others.” (Hart and Strudwick, 2025)

In political discourse more broadly, repetition serves not only a rhetorical, but also a cognitive function: it reinforces ideological framing and facilitates the internalization of dominant narratives. Trump's repeated phrases illustrate how iteration can naturalize claims, embed them in public consciousness, and privilege emotional over rational engagement.

(34) They're being threatened every single day, *they're gonna be out soon. They're gonna be out.* They don't have to be out, I would say, if they can hold out, you know in January 20th it's too long, you better get out of there, it's too unsafe, but January 20th, *those guys are gonna be out of their houses and they're gonna be out of this country. They're gonna be out of this country.* (10/11)

(35) You know where they gave the money? To illegal immigrants coming in, *many of whom* are killers. *Many of whom* are drug dealers. *Many of whom* are gang members. And *many of whom* came out of prisons from all over the world. (10/9)

This aligns with the rhetorical device of anaphora, in which the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses dramatizes urgency and emotional intensity (Charteris-Black, 2011). Alongside repetition, hyperbole features prominently in Trump's discourse. As Wodak (2009) notes, hyperbole is a common element of right-wing populist rhetoric, used to generate fear and construct a polarized "us versus them" narrative. Likewise, van Dijk (1993, p. 258) argues that

specific rhetorical figures, such as hyperboles or metaphors, preferentially affect the organization of models or the formation of opinions embodied in such models. Similarly, semantic moves may directly facilitate the formation or change of social attitudes, or they may do so indirectly, that is, through the generalization or decontextualization of personal models (including opinions) of specific events.

Amplification, intensification, and exaggeration are used to signal an extreme level of threat and danger posed to U.S. citizens. These effects are achieved through rhetorical devices such as noun-of-noun structures (examples 36 to 39), superlative forms, and hyperbole—arguably the most effective figure of speech for conveying exaggeration (examples 40 to 43).

(36) The only thing they didn't do though, they didn't stop the flights that were pouring in with *thousands and thousands* on actually the course of a couple of years, *hundreds of thousands of people* flying over our borders. (10/10)

(37) They don't want *millions of people* coming through our border, they don't want militaries pushing us around. They don't want crime in the middle of our streets, they don't want *hundreds of thousands of migrant criminals, criminals!* (10/10)

(38) You have *hundreds of thousands of people* being flown in over [...] you'd now have *hundreds of millions of people* coming in here" (10/11)

(39) We have *thousands of thousands and thousands of people* all over the streets. And they're rough people'. (10/1)

(40) They come from the Congo in Africa, they come from all over the Middle East, *some of the most hostile countries to us.* (10/1)

(41) No these people are amongst *the worst in the world.* (10/2)

(42) I mean how would you like to live with, like they're living where *thousands and thousands of criminals* are put into your towns or your city. (10/3 oct)

(43) And when you vote on Tuesday, remember this: Kamala Harris is importing illegal alien rapists and murderers, draconian monsters who are killing *our children, our brothers, our sisters, our parents, our friends...* they're willing to kill *anyone...* willing to kill *anyone*, these people, they are true evil. (11/4)

Repetition, hyperbole, and emotionally charged phrasing work together to bypass deliberative debate and instead mobilize affective responses. As Lakoff (2008, p. 8) notes, "emotion is both central and legitimate in political persuasion," enabling political actors to present themselves as protectors of a threatened community.

3.2. Generalization of the threat

Exaggeration operates alongside the strategies of globalization and universalization, which generalize the perceived threat and frame it as a matter of national urgency affecting the entire country:

(44) We're fighting on the border' and then we found out that big Boeing airplanes are flying over with hundreds of thousands of people; and dumping them into *towns and little cities and states all over the mid-west and all over our country*. (10/1)

(45) *Little cities and towns all over the country* are being invaded, but the ones that aren't, they're just as scared because they know it's gonna happen. (10/10)

(46) No, you have to move them out, you have to move them out, you can't do this to our country. And this is happening *all over our country, all over, all over our country*. (11/2)

Trump either uses vague references to migrants' countries of origin or repeatedly emphasizes the same ones. He frequently targets Venezuela (in connection with the *Tren de Aragua* gang), El Salvador (referencing MS-13), Congo, and Yemen – thereby reinforcing a perception of the threat as either ambiguous or multifaceted, as if danger is emerging from "all over the world," a phrase he repeats often. This again reflects a strategy of globalization. Notably, Congo is mentioned 19 times in the corpus and Venezuela 41 times across the 135 analyzed videos.

(47) From prisons and jails, they came; from insane asylums and mental institutions, *from all over the world. From Venezuela to the Congo* – I think a lot come from the *Congo*, I don't know what's happening in the Congo. We can almost tell the worst areas because if there's a run on the *Congo*, we know *Congo's* not doing well. But they come *from all over the world* » (10/13)

(48) For four straight years, she's imported an army of illegal alien gang members and migrant criminals *from the dungeons all over the world*. Not, not south America, all over the world they come. From prisons and jails, insane asylums, mental institutions. From Venezuela, from the Congo, all over. (10/13)

(49) *Caracas, Venezuela*, crime is down seventy-two percent. They're down because they're taking all the criminals and putting them here. (10/1)

(50) We have thousands of terrorists now coming in from *Yemen, from all over the world*, they're coming in. Not just South America, they're coming in *from all over the world*. (10/3)

3.3. Fear-mongering and emotional persuasion

Another rhetorical device employed by Trump is the manipulation of numerical data to persuade his audience and/or evoke fear. He frequently cites statistics, as numbers tend to lend legitimacy to his discourse – “the use of statistical data [...] is perceived by viewers as facts which influence their logic and rational perception” (Krysanova, 2024, p. 130). Two of the most frequently repeated figures are “thirteen thousand and ninety-nine murderers” – a strikingly precise number mentioned in 21 videos – and “twenty-one million people”, referring to the number of undocumented migrants, cited in 16 videos.

While numbers are supposed to be neutral, exact, and objective features in speech – giving the speaker a rigorous and serious image – they can also be used to appeal to emotions and indignation (Bacot, Desmarchelier & Rémi-Giraud, 2012, p. 11),⁸ especially when combined with dramatizing effects (e.g., “outraged,” “horrible” in the following examples):

(51) And under Kamala Harris, *thirteen thousand and ninety-nine illegal alien convicted murderers* are roaming free in the United-States and four hundred and *twenty-five thousand convicted migrant criminals* are right now into the United-States. But of them, think of this, of them, of them *thirteen thousand and ninety-nine* are murderers. (10/13)

(52) When you let *twenty-one million people* in our country, and let me tell you, if she’s here for four years, she’ll have *two hundred million people* in our country. And they’ll likewise, they will likewise come from prisons and mental institutions. So, I’m outraged that over *thirteen thousand -- the exact number is 13 099, convicted illegal alien murderers* are now on the loose. They allowed to come in over *thirteen thousand murderers*. Many of them murdering many more than one person. They’re murderers. [...]. So think of it, *thirteen thousand. It’s two hundred and forty thousand very serious*, but it’s actually *six hundred and forty-four thousand major criminals* came in with *the twenty-one million people*. [...] We’ve got *thirteen thousand people* that are worse than any criminal we’ve been looking for, for a long time. (10/1)

(53) *425,000 convicted criminal aliens*, according to ICE’s newly published data, are now free to roam the United States, they’re roaming all over the country. (10/1)

(54) Perhaps, worse of all, Kamala’s mass migrant invasion will destroy our economy, importing *tens of millions* of, I mean think of it, more illegal aliens than we’ve ever thought about taking in. [...]. She did a horrible job. She allowed *21 million plus people* to come in. (10/2)

(55) Again, you had *thirteen thousand, more than thirteen thousand, to be exact 13 099*. And these are murderers. (10/2)

As can be seen in the examples, these figures are most often employed in conjunction with the rhetorical strategies of repetition and hyperbole to reinforce the threat that migrants embody. In metaphorical or hyperbolic contexts, numbers

⁸ “Le chiffre, expression d’une froide rationalité, devient le véhicule privilégié de l’émotion. C’est donc plus le pathos (et l’ethos) que le logos, plus le sentiment que la raison, qui sont les destinataires de l’argument par le nombre” (Bacot, Desmarchelier & Rémi-Giraud, 2012, p. 11) [“The figure, an expression of cold rationality, becomes the privileged vehicle of emotion. Thus, it is more pathos (and ethos) than logos – more feeling than reason – that constitutes the target of the argument by numbers” – author’s translation].

shift from representing exact values to conveying maximization and exaggeration, thereby generating fear. Furthermore, this process of desubjectification – reducing individuals to statistics or abstract threats – serves a dehumanizing function, reinforcing the perception of migrants as anonymous dangers rather than as human beings with individual stories and lived experiences. As Mannoni (2024, p. 91) notes, the rhetorical strategy consists in provoking fear or indignation by exaggerating isolated incidents or selectively referencing statistics that support a pre-established narrative.⁹

3.4. A multimodal approach

Trump’s co-speech gestures¹⁰ also play a significant role in reinforcing his anti-immigration stance. One particularly frequent gesture is the beat, which McNeill defines as “a simple flick of the hand or fingers up and down; or back and forth” (1992, 15) describes as “the politician’s gesture par excellence” (ibid., p. 16). He explains that the beat “indexes the word or phrase it accompanies as being significant – not for its own semantic content, but for its discourse-pragmatic content” (ibid., p. 15).

(56) So, | all of the | agony, | all of the suffering, | all of the | inflation and | the border and the | criminals coming into our country.¹¹ (10/09)

In (56), the hyperbolic and repetitive context is enhanced with beats¹² on three noun phrases to emphasize the exaggeration.

Pointing as a deictic gesture is also commonly used. As Hart (2024, p. 3) puts it, pointing “is used simultaneously to draw attention to a specific stretch of discourse, to signal that the point being made in that stretch of discourse is a particularly “sharp” or effective one, and potentially to brand oneself as an argumentatively sharp or effective speaker. ” This is what happens in (57):

(57) But many are dead, most are dead, | many are in | sex slavery, | many are in | slavery. But they’re | many dead. Three hundred and twenty-five thousand young kids¹³ (10/09)

In this example, the precision grip – “a discourse-focus marking device, indicating in gestural space where a point in rhetorical space is being made” (Scalfani, 2024, p. 61) – occurs in the underlined part and highlights the number,

⁹ Original text in French: “semer la peur, susciter l’indignation, surjouer le moindre incident, exploiter la moindre statistique trafiquée”.

¹⁰ Hart and Strudwick (2025) define co-speech gestures as hand or body movements that co-exist with the message in the communicative act and therefore “collaborate with speech in the expression of meaning.”

¹¹ <https://x.com/TrumpWarRoom/status/1844109295090008110> (4’54”-5’0”)

¹² Beats are marked here with the symbol |.

¹³ <https://x.com/TrumpWarRoom/status/1844109295090008110> (0’56”-1’07”)

while in the first part of the speech, he is holding his hand vertically, slightly beating to mark all the occurrences of “many” as well as “sex” and “slavery”. Hart (2024, p. 20) states that thanks to pointing gestures “Trump is able to entertain his audience, engage directly with them, steer their attention, and align himself with his audience as a man of the people.”

Pointing is also used to denounce the threat immigrants represent in a discursive strategy aiming to attracting the audience’s attention as well as legitimizing the speech, such as in the following example:

(58) And I used to talk about this, said “if they don’t get it right, you’ll have Venezuela on steroids. Do you remember?¹⁴ (10/11)

Here, there is a succession of gestures: a wide index-pointing on Trump’s right-hand side on “if they don’t get it right”, followed by a precision grip, when he uses his thumb and other fingers to mimic a pinching gesture, on “Venezuela on steroids” accompanied by a vertical beat and eventually a wide open-palm gesture on his right again at the end of the sentence.

Another gesture Trump used to create focalization is shrugging accompanied with eyebrow raises:

(59) Immediately upon taking the oath of office I’ll launch the largest deportation program in American history. Have to... have to do it.¹⁵ (10/16)

Here, “have to” is marked twice thanks to the shrug and the eyebrow rise. As Ferré puts it (2019, p. 156), the latter is linked to focalization. Most of the time, eyebrow-raising accompanies intensifiers, exaggeration or hyperbolic speech. It therefore underlines the inevitable obligation of putting the “deportation program” in place. Hart and Strudwick (2025) explain that Trump’s use of shrugging has to be understood as a modal gesture to express “the speaker’s stance toward the proposition communicated”. It is therefore a “stance-taking act” since shrugs are “epistemic-evidential markers relating to the gesturer’s degree of knowledge of, and commitment to, a state of affairs”. Hart and Strudwick (2025) state that shrugs may “be used to convey the obviousness of a state of affairs, based on facts observable to everybody or general knowledge and doxic¹⁶ beliefs.” Considering the fact that in (59) the shrug accompanies the modal marker “have to”, it underlines his commitment. In their study, Hart and Strudwick (2025) explain that Trump’s shrug gestures express common ground and obviousness, and reinforce the alignment between him and his audience. They add that “Trump uses shrugs in argument sequences to present proposed political changes as clear and obvious responses to current circumstances.”

¹⁴ <https://x.com/theblaze/status/1844842072131707298> (1’07”-1’13”)

¹⁵ <https://x.com/TrumpWarRoom/status/1846369316108726425> (0’00”-0’18”)

¹⁶ Doxic beliefs are to be understood as beliefs that are taken for granted as self-evident or natural within a particular social group or society.

The last example stands out for its originality:

(60) If you take a look at Springfield Ohio, How 'bout that? They have, they have about fifty thousand people. No crime, beautiful community, everything nice, schools, everything nice. They dropped in thirty-two thousand people that are really illegal, you know they did it in such a way that they can make the case, you know. They said they did it through probation what's probation? They took 'em in, they took 'em in through probation, so I assume they assumed they're like prisoners or something. And therefore, they're illegal.¹⁷ (10/11)

In (60), what is particularly noteworthy is the creation of a fictional space through Trump's use of circular gestures and vertical beats. These gestures construct an imagined virtual community – Springfield – into which undocumented migrants are being introduced. The looping gesture accompanying “they took 'em in,” directed inward toward his own body, visually delineates the inside/outside features of this fictional space. In contrast, when Trump refers to “they”, the gesture's amplitude widens, implying that “they” originate outside the initially constructed space. This contrast reinforces a binary spatial opposition between insiders and outsiders. Here, the metaphoric gesture (McNeill, 1992, p. 15) visually enacts the imagery of invasion. Trump thus builds a gestural world that viewers can populate with their own mental representations and associations. The persuasive power of this strategy lies in its ambiguity and adaptability: it resonates with a wide range of preexisting fears and representations of migrant “invasion”, making the argument more emotionally and cognitively impactful.

4. Conclusion

Trump's populist discourse lies on both classic and innovative representations of migrants: the recurring themes of dehumanization, existential crisis, and the call for authoritarian intervention. References to mass deportations, for instance, may resonate with notions of ethnic or political purges, or with ideologies of national restoration. By portraying migrants as animals and carriers of disease, Trump reduces marginalized groups to subhuman or parasitic entities perceived as threats to national purity. The use of invasion metaphors further reinforces the idea of an internal enemy whose presence ostensibly justifies militarized responses.

Trump's rhetoric also relies on effective discursive strategies. His messages are frequently reiterated and accompanied by emotionally charged devices such as repetition, hyperbole, and exaggeration. The enemy is presented as an indistinct, depersonalized mass – its contours blurred by appeals to globalization and generalization. It is also worth noting that Trump very often conflates immigration and illegal immigration. He also uses shortcuts between asylum seekers,

¹⁷ <https://x.com/theblaze/status/1844842072131707298> (1'39"-2'14")

illegal immigrants and criminals, creating confusion and a climate of anxiety. The audience is further persuaded through the strategic manipulation of data, references to miscellaneous news items, and selective use of statistics, all aimed at legitimizing the message. Finally, an examination of the multimodal dimension highlights how these rhetorical techniques collectively support an anti-immigration stance in the lead-up to the American presidential election, which was poised to see Trump assume office as the 47th President of the United States. His rhetoric thus efficiently functions not only to instil fear but also to normalize extreme measures as rational and inevitable responses to a manufactured crisis.

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