TWEETING 'ENGAGEMENT'
Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

PIERGIORGIO TREVISAN
UNIVERSITY OF UDINE

Abstract – The main aim of this study is to describe the linguistic and discursive strategies of speaker-hearer alignment used by Donald Trump in his tweets about 'fake news'. As previous work by Miller (2002; 2004) and Quam and Ryshina-Pankova (2016) has shown, Engagement theory (Martin and White 2005) can shed light on particular strategies politicians employ to strengthen their arguments and persuade their audiences to adopt their views. Starting from the assumption that Donald Trump's use of Twitter played in his favour already in the 2016 Presidential campaign, the present analysis shows that Donald Trump tends to privilege meaning-making choices which 'fend off' or 'shut down' dialogistic alternatives: typically, his tweets contain either 'bare assertions' which take shared assumptions for granted, or 'contractive heteroglossic' options that make the dialogic space very constrained. In general, the 'Engagement moves' deployed are quite limited and repetitive, consisting mainly of 'Denials', 'Pronouncements', and 'Counters': this might work to Donald Trump's advantage, as repetitions can give the speaker an air of authority and provoke an unconscious response of support among his followers (Lakoff 2016).
This study also shows that the distribution of linguistic and discursive strategies in Donald Trump's tweets is very similar to the distribution of the same resources in non-Twitter contexts: therefore, his 'Engagement style' in Twitter does not seem to be due to the character-limit of the platform, but to a more general 'cross-media' tendency that tends to tune down alternative positions.

Keywords: discourse analysis; political discourse; engagement theory; dialogue space; communication strategies

> *If the press should cover me accurately & honourably, I would have far less reason to "tweet". Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen!*
> (D. Trump, tweet 05th of February 2016)

1. Introduction

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries declared the neologism "*post-truth*" as word of the year. They defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". This sufficiently captures the relatively high freedom of expression made possible by the pervasive use of social media in all fields of contemporary human life. As pointed out by many commentators, a possible consequence of this in today's communicative landscape is that misinformation tends to dominate (Napolitano and Aiezza 2018, p. 94), and the 'truth' has become "so devalued that what was once the gold standard of political debate is [now] a worthless currency" (Norman 2016).

By consistently using social media both during his presidential campaign and after

his election, and by regularly accusing the press and his opponents of inventing *fake news* against him, Donald Trump (DT, henceforth) has quickly become a major exponent in *post-truth* political discourse, thus attracting the attention of linguists and media researchers worldwide. His compulsive use of Twitter has been analysed as an example of "How to do things with words" (Austin 1962, quoted in Quam and Ryshina-Pankova 2016, p. 141) in the political arena i.e. of how a populist leader can develop his form of "tecno-plebiscitariasnism" (Krämer 2017, p. 1297): behind the apparent inclusiveness and reciprocity typical of the platform, it is possible to build consensus by inviting the community to share, like or re-tweet particular stances (Demata 2018, p. 73). In particular, by strategically choosing and repeating a limited number of hashtags for his tweets,[1] Trump has been able to successfully create "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna 2012, p. 83), namely a form of social identification and sense of belonging for communities of users who use the same tag.[2]

In addition, the nature of Twitter itself, a platform promoting "simplicity, impulsivity and incivility" (Ott 2017, p. 63), has been considered by many analysts to perfectly suit the simple language communication style of the US President. The 140-character limit seems an ideal platform for non-elaborated, sometimes grammatically incorrect language which, however, gives an impression of spontaneity and authenticity mostly unknown to 'conventional' political discourse (Demata 2018, p. 86). Features of the President's language singled out by researchers include simple syntax, short words, first person singular pronouns, a childish but direct lexicon, exclamations, quotation marks, *shouty* capitalizations and intensifiers like *very*, *so*, *totally*, *true*, evaluations (Napolitano and Aiezza 2018, p. 102). By resorting to choices that reflect spoken discourse, Trump's use of language in Twitter simulates informality and matter-of-factness. The pervasiveness of amplification and attitudinal lexis also appeals to the users' emotions, thus reinforcing the solidarity DT seeks to cultivate with his target.

Unsurprisingly, quantitative and readability investigations into Trump's language use in non-Twitter contexts have reached similar conclusions. Yaquin Wang and Haitao Liu have found that, after analysing vocabulary richness (MATTR), readability (Flesch–Kincaid (FK) test) and thematic concentration, Trump's language use resembles that of a fourth-grade student. However, in some other communicative contexts, like campaign speeches, he does 'elevate' his style, thus reaching the level of a typical junior high student (Wang and Liu 2017, p. 17).

In the light of the above mentioned studies, this paper joins the debate by focusing on another aspect of DT's language: the strategies of alignment/disalignment he adopts to position himself in respect to the topics broached through his official Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump. Drawing on the Engagement system framework elaborated within the larger context of the Appraisal System framework (Martin and White 2005), this paper focuses on the functional role of some linguistic resources with the aim of investigating how intersubjective relations of alignment and disalignment are linguistically construed, negotiated and made rhetorically functional by means of wordings traditionally analysed

---

[1] Hashtags are descriptive annotations preceded by the symbol "#" employed by users in order to describe their tweets.

[2] As Demata (2018) explains, hashtags constituted a major driving force of Trump's success: during the month before the elections, Clinton published nearly twice the number of tweets as Trump (1044 vs 529), but that did not translate into greater diffusion. The diffusion of Trump's tweets based on hashtags outstripped Clinton's by a ratio of five to one by Election Day.

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

339

under comparable headings in alternative frameworks (Miller 2004, p. 2).[3]

In other words, following Bakhtin's influential notion that any utterance is implicitly 'dialogic', and exists "against a backdrop of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 281), this paper deals with how Trump shapes his public identity by creating solidarity with his audience by means of alignment/disalignment with certain, previously uttered, positions/ideas. Given the topicality of issues around fake news, a corpus of 200 tweets dealing specifically with this theme was collected and analysed. In addition, a comparative analysis with other studies dealing with DT's Engagement strategies in non-Twitter contexts was also carried out: this might help starting to identify similarities and differences in the President's discourse strategies across different media.

The Engagement system proves particularly suitable for the analysis of political discourse, which often seeks the mobilisation of specific interest groups or demographics (Wang and Liu 2017, p. 144). By focusing on alignment strategies associated with particular value positions, the framework reveals how speakers appeal to their audience and create affiliations (White 2003, p. 275). The presentation of its resources, together with their rhetoric potential for meaning-making, is the aim of the next section.

2. The Engagement system

Engagement is one of the systems of the Appraisal framework, together with Attitude and Graduation. Inspired by Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), Appraisal is a discourse semantic resource construing interpersonal meanings.[4] Engagement is concerned with the way in which resources position the speaker/writer with respect to the value positions being advanced and to the potential responses to those value positions (Martin and White 2005, p. 36).

Within the Engagement system, the most important distinction is made between utterances that do not acknowledge the possibility of a competing truth claim ('monoglossic' or 'bare assertions') and those that acknowledge that possibility ('heteroglossic'). A system network for this basic distinction is reported in Fig. 1 below:
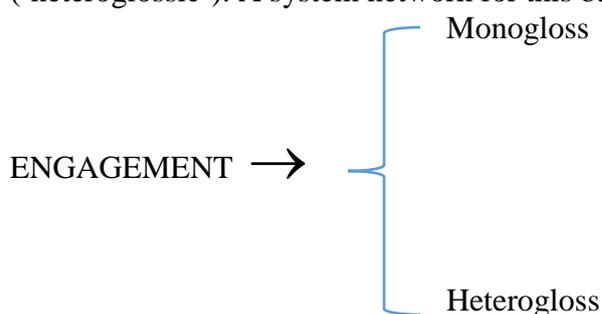
Monogloss

ENGAGEMENT →

Heterogloss

Fig. 1
The basic system-network for Engagement.

---

[3] These include 'modality', 'polarity', 'evidentiality', 'hedging', 'intensification', 'concession', 'attribution', 'consequentiality' and 'metadiscursivity' (see, e.g., Labov 1972, 1984; Biber and Finnegan 1988, 1989; Chafe 1986; Hyland 1996).

[4] In the systemic-functional perspective, meanings realised in a text are activated by the 'Context of situation'. In particular, 'Field' (what is going on in a particular context?) activates 'Ideational' meanings, 'Tenor' (who is taking part in a particular context?) activates 'Interpersonal' meanings, 'Mode' (how are the meanings being exchanged in a particular context?) activates 'Textual' meanings.

Examples of monoglossic statements are "Just hit 50% in the Rasmussen Poll, much higher than President Obama at same point" (Tweet 15th of April, 2018), or the minor clause "Just more Fake News from a biased newspaper!" (Tweet 12th of April, 2018): in both sentences, DT construes single-voiced bare assertions that bear no dialogistic alternative; the minor clause, in particular, falls within the category of 'presupposition' – something which is not at issue, not up for discussion.[5] On the other hand, statements like "They probably know it was Fake News" (Tweet February 20th, 2018), or "The unnamed sources don't exist" (Tweet 19th of December, 2017) invoke possible dialogistic alternatives: in the first sentence, the modal adjunct "probably" entertains the possibility that there may be alternative views, whereas in the second sentence the negation implies that there may be people who think the opposite: therefore, according to this framework, both sentences are heteroglossic.

However, the degree of acknowledgment of possible alternatives in heteroglossic clauses or sentences may vary significantly. A clause or sentence could be either dialogically *expansive* or dialogically *contractive*:
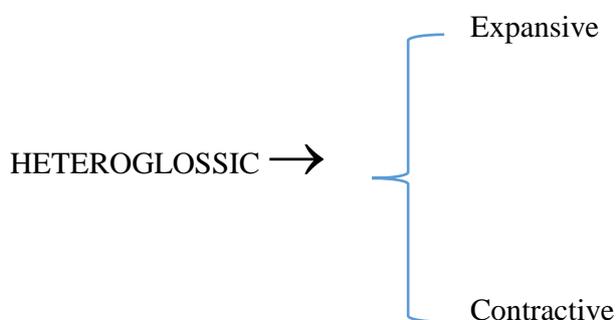

Expansive

HETEROGLOSSIC →

Contractive

Fig. 2
Basic system-network for heteroglossic engagement.

For example:

1. Some people <u>think</u> numbers could be in the 50's. (Tweet November 14th, 2017)
2. Rex Tillerson <u>never</u> threatened to resign. (Tweet October 5th, 2017)

While it is evident that both clauses are heteroglossic, as they refer to points of view from external voices, there is a clear difference between the stance adopted in the two examples. In the first example, the verb "think" makes allowance for alternative positions, although there is no indication as to where the authorial voice stands. The second example, while still heteroglossic, has a different effect: by using the adverb "never", DT distances himself from a previously expressed idea [the fact that some media reported that Rex Tillerson was about to resign]. The first example is therefore heteroglossic *expansive*, in that the speaker/writer, by just acknowledging another point of view, leaves room for alternative positions; the second one is heteroglossic *contractive*, in that a contrary position is invoked but is immediately said not to hold. In other words, the 'interpersonal cost' for anyone who would advance alternative formulations is quite different: very high in the second example, much lower in the first one.

---

[5] The corpus contains a significant number of minor clauses, probably due to Twitter character constraints. For the sake of analysis, they have been included in the count of Engagement resources.

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

341

Heteroglossic engagement resources are further categorised according to the degree to which speakers/writers acknowledge previous speakers and engage with them. Table 1 below summarises all the possible options singled out by Martin and White (2005), thus mapping out a continuum of "theoretical possibility of alternative opinion" (Simon-Vandenbergen, White, & Aijmer 2007, p. 46).

DIALOGIC ROLE	TYPE	SUBTYPE	EXAMPLE OF TYPICAL LANGUAGE MARKERS	EXAMPLES
Contraction	Proclaim *Formulations which confront, challenge or overwhelm dialogic alternatives*	Concur *Formulations which construe an addresser as having the same knowledge as the addressee*	*Naturally, not surprisingly, certainly, admittedly, rhetorical questions*	<u>Naturally</u>, he understood their reaction.
		Pronounce *Formulations which contain explicit authorial intervention*, also signalled by exclamation marks	*The truth of the matter is*, *Let me tell you*, *You must agree that*, *I contend*, *Really*, *Indeed*	Much of the Media is a Scam! They are wrong<u>!</u>
		Endorse *Formulations which are attributed to external sources and are construed as true, valid, warrantable*	*Show*, *Prove*, *Point out*, *demonstrate*, *Establish*	As Peter's talk <u>showed</u>, climate change is a real challenge.
	Disclaim *Alternative positions are invoked and directly rejected*	Deny *The author categorically rejects an alternative, thus introducing the alternative position in the dialogue*		There is <u>nothing</u> wrong with fasting one day a week
		Counter *Formulations which invoke a contrary position which does not hold*	*Even though*, *However*, *Yet*, *But*, *Even*	<u>Even though</u> public opinion thinks differently, you should keep working for the planned reforms.
Expansion	Entertain *The authorial voice makes it clear that its position is one of a number of possible positions*		*May*, *Might*, *Could*, *Perhaps*, *Possibly*, *It's possible that*, *Usually*, *often*, *sometimes*,	That was <u>possibly</u> the worst mistake ever. [..] dishonest and unfair "press,"

			should, must[6]	now often referred to Fake News Media.
	Attribute *Formulations that disassociate the preposition from the text's internal authorial voice*	Distance *Formulations which signal an explicit distancing of the authorial voice from the attributed material*	Claim	The President <u>claimed</u> he did the best he could do.
		Acknowledge *No overt indication as to where the authorial voice stands*	Say, report, declare, believe, state	What the opposition is <u>saying</u> is that they are not going to vote the law

Table 1
The Engagement system in detail.

The resources offered by this framework can shed light on the contested communicative methods of the American President and frame a preliminary 'trans-medial' discussion on how the same engagement resources are/are not used when different communication channels are employed.

3. Tweeting Engagement: analysis and discussion

For the purpose of this study, all tweets about "Fake News" produced by DT were selected from the website http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com and analysed manually. The tweets were all sent from the same account, @realDonaldTrump, and cover a period of time ranging from the 10th of December, 2016 to the 11th of May, 2018.

The first step in the analysis consisted in calculating the ratio of monoglossic to heteroglossic assertions in the clauses. After that, all the heteroglossic clauses were analysed in terms of contraction or expansion, and further investigated according to the categories outlined in Table one. The results were also compared to a previous study carried out by Quam and Ryshima-Pankova (2016), who focused on longer stretches of text.

Before considering the statistical distribution of choices, it can be observed that DT's communicative strategy relies heavily on the interpolation of different Engagement types that construe distinct dialogic roles. By way of preliminary exemplification, the following tweet will be considered:

---

[6] Directives, realized by means of deontic modals are usually coded as Entertain, therefore 'expanding' resources. However, in the corpus they often co-occur with exclamation marks. In those cases, they have been coded as Proclaim: Pronounce, in that they clearly show authorial interventions stating what is/is not to be done.

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

343

> *Nov 11, 2017 07:43:36 PM Does the Fake News Media remember when Crooked Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, was begging Russia to be our friend with the misspelled reset button? Obama tried also, but he had zero chemistry with Putin.*

As previously observed by other researchers (Demata 2018; Melchior and Romoli 2018), Trump's use of language is often characterised by a conversational and rather informal register, not rarely combined with attitudinal lexis ("Crooked", "begging", "zero chemistry"): this helps the creation of a particular audience, a community with whom he regularly talks about Fake News and many other aspects of the American policy.

From the discourse semantic perspective, the first sentence is a rhetorical question establishing a Proclaim: Concur move that clearly presumes a 'No' answer. DT, in other words, construes a dialogic partner who is aligned with his [negative] opinions both about Hilary Clinton and about the news media, that seem to have now forgotten when she was "begging" Russia to be a friend of America's. In the second sentence, 'concession' is created through the adversative "but" at the beginning of the second clause, where it is stated that Obama had "zero" chemistry with Putin. This is to be interpreted as a Disclaim: Counter strategy, a maximally contractive choice which invokes – but soon rejects - the alternative possibility that Obama *might* have had chemistry. The force of the statement is then immediately enhanced by the Disclaim: Deny move realised through word "zero", itself a form of negation, which also denies the proposition. Overall, the second sentence strongly disclaims the idea that Obama might have had chemistry with Putin.

Space restrictions preclude extensive exemplification of the many Engagement category-interpolations occurring in Trump's tweets throughout the corpus, however it is significant to notice, right from the beginning, that they are a recurrent rhetorical strategy of discourse construction in the majority of tweets analysed.

3.1. Interpolations between monoglossic and heteroglossic resources: some observations

More than 40% of the clauses in DT's tweets are monoglossic, 'undialogised' bare assertions (44%). As anticipated above, they are often interrupted by heteroglossic assertions opening up different degrees of 'dialogic space'. Consider the following tweet, in which the President was writing about a porn actress [Stormy Daniels] who had just alluded to a sexual encounter with him some years earlier:

> *- Apr 18, 2018 05:08:50 AM A sketch years later about a nonexistent man. A total con job, playing the Fake News Media for Fools (but they know it)!*

In the first, minor, clause, a bare assertion characterised by a very simple structure and choice of words, DT refers to a sketch of a man drawn by Stormy Daniels, who has recently accused him of threatening her to keep silent after a sexual encounter. The President does not hesitate to define the man in the sketch as "non-existent", and he does so by using a nominalisation instead of, say, a construction like "that man does not exist". As will be explained later, nominalisations tend to encode shared understanding, therefore solidarity between addressers and addressees. In the second sentence, this denial is further reinforced by means of the inscribed evaluation "con-job" amplified by the adjective "total". In the last part of the sentence, a Disclaim heteroglossic resource ("but they know it") 'gives voice' to what DT calls "Fake News Media", but he does so by means of a

maximally contractive option (Disclaim: counter), which normally invokes a position which is said not to hold. In this case, he first states that Stormy Daniel's declaration plays the media for fool, and then he counters this view by declaring that the media are aware of this ("they know it"). The presupposition is that, despite knowing that Stormy Daniel's story is invented, the media apparatus is still keen on pretending to trust her (and thus sounding "fool") in order to sully the President.

The significant amount of monoglossic resources in the corpus may account for the speaker's need to be assertive and take the opinion of the audience for granted, but there is probably more to it than that. As Martin and White (2005, p. 98-102) point out, bare assertions can construe either solidarity or power: in the first case, a proposition is represented as common knowledge, i.e. as taken-for-granted, therefore as uncontentious and not subject to discussion. In the second case, the assertions are presented as very much in the spotlight, therefore subject to discussion and argumentation: hence, the textual voice assumes sufficient status to be able to exclude alternative viewpoints.

With reference to DT's tweets, these typologies are often realised in propositions that also contain heteroglossic resources: for the sake of exemplification, in the tweets that follow nominal groups that construe presuppositions are treated as bare assertions, keeping in mind that the co-text is often dominated by heteroglossic options:

> *- Oct 11, 2017 05:31:18 AM It would be really nice if the Fake News Media would report the virtually unprecedented Stock Market growth since the election. Need tax cuts*

> *- Oct 19, 2017 06:17:52 AM Uranium deal to Russia, with Clinton help and Obama Administration knowledge, is the biggest story that Fake Media doesn't want to follow!*

In the first tweet, the proposition that the Stock Market has grown since the election is construed as something which is not at issue. This is realised by means of a grammatical metaphor whereby the verb 'to grow' has been turned into a noun, "growth". The nominalisation is even more powerful considering that it is pre-modified by heavily loaded attitudinal lexis ('virtually unprecedented'), 'Appreciation' in Appraisal terms (Martin and White 2005, p. 56). However, solidarity with the readers is here realised by a nominal group ("virtually unprecedented knowledge") projected by the clause "if the Fake News Media would report", an heteroglossic instance of Attribution: Acknowledge. Therefore, solidarity is here realised by means of an embedded preposition, not a bare assertion. In addition, the sentence also displays the modalising elements "would be nice", "would report" that are clear examples of heteroglossia.

In the second tweet, the fact that the Obama Administration knew about uranium deals with Russia is again taken for granted via the nominalisation "knowledge". However, what may at first sight seem a bare assertion is indeed another instance of heteroglossia, as the negative "doesn't want" at the end of the sentence invokes potential contrary positions to the idea that the media do not want to talk about Clinton's and Obama's deals with Russia. The pre-modifier "Fake", pervasive in all tweets, is itself loaded with negative evaluation, Judgement in Appraisal terms.

DT's tweets are not only of the 'solidarity' type: indeed, several topics he addresses are focal points for discussion and argumentation in the current US debate, yet he regularly self-attributes sufficient status and authority (i.e. power) to exclude alternative viewpoints:

> *- Apr 15, 2018 07:19:42 AM The Syrian raid was so perfectly carried out, with such precision, that the only way the Fake News Media could demean was by my use of the term "Mission Accomplished." I knew they would seize on this but felt it is such a great*

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

345

> *Military term, it should be brought back. Use often!*

The bare assertion contained in the opening clause introduces a topic which was very much in the spotlight at the beginning of 2018: indeed, at the time, hotly debated discussions inside and outside America were addressing the issue of precision/perfection of the US raids in Syria. Despite this, DT's first clause seems to categorically fend off any viewpoint not aligned with his one, also by means of attitudinal lexis ("perfectly") and amplification ("<u>so</u> perfectly"). As already observed above, the force of the message is strengthened by heteroglossic resources realised in the co-text, mainly via Attribution ("my use of the term 'I felt'"; "I knew they would seize on this"), Disclaim: Counter ("but") and Proclaim: Pronounce ("Use often!"), which also sounds like a traditional 'Call to Action'.[7]

Not unusually, bare assertions are interpolated with Disclaim: Counter or Proclaim: Pronounce moves, in which some value positions are introduced and immediately denied without any sort of rhetorical elaborations:

> *Nov 14, 2017 03:07:29 AM One of the most accurate polls last time around. But #FakeNews likes to say we're in the 30's. They are wrong. Some people think numbers could be in the 50's. Together, WE will MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!*

In the first three clauses, bare assertions in the first (minor) clause and in the third one are interpolated with a Disclaim: Counter move ("But #FakeNews likes to say we're in the 30's") aimed at aligning the readers with DT's view that the Fake News apparatus is constantly criticizing him. The third clause ("They are wrong"), in particular, exemplifies a bare assertion construing power, as the President is here self-assuming sufficient status to exclude any alternative viewpoint: indeed, he provides no elaboration/exemplification, apart from the very general Attribution: acknowledge move about some people who, supposedly, do not agree with the Fake News apparatus. Additionally, a typically hammering Trump *slogan* closes the tweets by means of a Proclaim: Pronounce move in which an inclusive "We" purports to make America great again. The tweet also well exemplifies DT's recurrent use of features, like capitalisations and exclamation marks, that are typical hallmarks of spoken registers: quite intuitively, the aim is to create a colloquial style that simulates proximity between the President and his followers, and is in line with the main findings of other studies (Golshan 2016; Liberman 2016a, 2016b; Pullum 2015) investigating DT's language on public occasions.

With all this in mind, it is significant to observe that, albeit limited in number, the corpus also contains tweets that are almost entirely monoglossic, as the following examples show:

> *Oct 1, 2017 07:22:14 AM We have done a great job with the almost impossible situation in Puerto Rico. Outside of the Fake News or politically motivated ingrates,...*

---

[7] Interestingly, the clause "Mission accomplished" also sounds like an intertextual reference to George W. Bush's statement in May 2003 celebrating the end of the Second Gulf War: in that case, the President was shown standing under a giant "Mission Accomplished" banner, just six weeks after the invasion. However, the war continued for many years and the banner became a symbol of America's mistakes and misjudgments during the war.
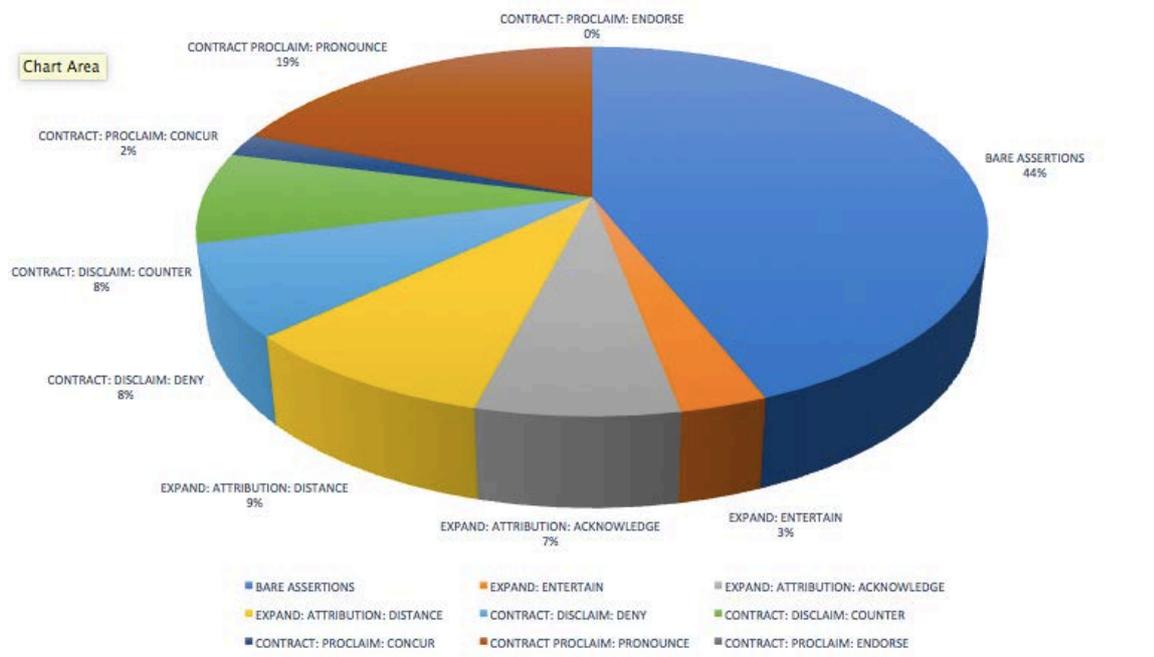
Dec 9, 2017 05:01:44 PM .@DaveWeigel @WashingtonPost put out a phony photo of an empty arena hours before I arrived @ the venue, w/ thousands of people outside, on their way in. Real photos now shown as I spoke. Packed house, many people unable to get in. Demand apology & retraction from FAKE NEWS WaPo.

Apr 3, 2018 05:34:18 AM The Fake News Networks, those that knowingly have a sick and biased AGENDA, are worried about the competition and quality of Sinclair Broadcast. The "Fakers" at CNN, NBC, ABC & CBS have done so much dishonest reporting that they should only be allowed to get awards for fiction.

Quite interestingly, the ratio of monoglossic to heteroglossic resources of this corpus is not very dissimilar from Quam and Ryshina-Pankova's (2016)'s findings related to Trump's speeches during the American electoral campaign: in their analysis, they noticed how, even in longer texts, 54.27% of his assertions were made in a highly constrained dialogic space, taking the agreement with the audience for granted. Unexpectedly for a corpus of tweets aimed primarily at challenging the alternative positions advanced by the media, where an overwhelming rate of heteroglossia might be expected, the monoglossia resources are still significantly high (44%), even though not as high as in the longer campaign speeches. We might therefore hypothesise that, despite the 140-word limit of the platform, DT's general 'attitudinal style' of identity construction tends to shut down alternative positions without convincing elaborations.

3.2 Heteroglossia

First of all, let us have a look at the following graph, where the distribution of Trump's choices in the Engagement system is made clear:

Graph 1
Distribution of Engagement resources in the Corpus.

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

347

More than 50% of Trump's statements are heteroglossic However, as explained in Table 1, heteroglossic resources can be divided into two broad categories according to whether they are 'dialogically expansive' or 'dialogically contractive'. As can be noted, what may initially look like a promising rate in terms of dialogic space (56% of the assertions are, indeed, heteroglossic), does not actually translate into actual intersubjective space. Indeed, out of 56% of the heteroglossic assertions, 37% of them consist of 'contraction', namely of meanings directed towards closing down the space for dialogic alternatives from any subsequent communicative interaction (Martin and White 2005, p. 117). In other words, contractive resources generally operate by making clear that the speaker, although referencing the utterances or viewpoints of external sources (therefore creating heteroglossia), is not necessarily aligned with them – despite making reference to them, he/she tends to fend them off.

The most widely used heteroglossic resource is, perhaps not surprisingly, Proclaim: Pronounce, followed by Disclaim: Deny and Disclaim: Counter. Even if they are dialogistic in that they acknowledge the presence of a counter view, Proclaim: Pronounce formulations are contractive resources, in that they resist and confront the alternatives by means of overt interventions of the speaker/writer. Trump's tweets are rich in authorial emphases:

> - Sep 30, 2017 02:53:51 PM To the people of Puerto Rico: Do not believe the #FakeNews! #PRStrong
>
> - Oct 4, 2017 10:18:28 AM The @NBCNews story has just been totally refuted by Sec. Tillerson and @VP Pence. It is #Fake News. They should issue an apology to AMERICA!
>
> - Dec 2, 2017 09:22:40 PM Congratulations to @ABC News for suspending Brian Ross for his horrendously inaccurate and dishonest report on the Russia, Russia, Russia Witch Hunt. More Networks and "papers" should do the same with their Fake News!
>
> - Dec 9, 2017 06:14:34 PM .@daveweigel of the Washington Post just admitted that his picture was a FAKE (fraud?) showing an almost empty arena last night for my speech in Pensacola when, in fact, he knew the arena was packed (as shown also on T.V.). FAKE NEWS, he should be fired!

Even though he is not resorting to typical formulations like "I contend", "the truth is", "you must agree that", it is very evident that DT's strategy is to highlight some of his views in order to go against alternative opinions: in doing so, he tends to intensify his words by means of exclamation marks and/or imperatives, rather than through more explicit elaborations.[8] The tweet from September 30th is an imperative to the inhabitants of Porto Rico who, in his view, should not trust the media apparatus; the tweet from October 4th interpersonally combines a directive, an exclamation and capital letters in order to 'demand for goods and services',[9] i.e. the NBC News should apologise to America for delivering what he considers Fake News. Tweet 3 and tweet 4 have the same structure: a topic is first introduced in the first clauses, not unusually accompanied by attitudinal language ("*horrendously inaccurate and dishonest*"; "*totally refuted*"), then some

---

[8] It might be argued that this is due to the space constriction typical of the platform, however on other occasions DT has not hesitated to produce more than one tweet in order to conclude his line of reasoning.

[9] This is how Halliday classifies the two dimensions of 'speech roles' and 'commodity' in interaction: 'Giving information', 'Giving goods and services', Demanding information', 'Demanding goods and services'(Halliday and Mathiessen 2004: 107).

evoked Judgement is 'shouted out' in the closing sentence through a Pronounce move realised linguistically as a directive, modulated sentence.

The most widely used resources after Proclaim: Pronounce are the two sub-types of Disclaim: Deny and Counter. Both of them belong to the 'Contract' category, and are indeed the most contractive resources available to a speaker, since in one case a proposition is denied (thus admitting the heteroglossic existence of that proposition), in the other case an alternative position is invoked but immediately rejected as not valid. Not unusually, DT intersperses the different resources in the same tweet, as demonstrated by the following text, produced on April 17, 2018:

> *Apr 17, 2018 12:59:39 PM Rasmussen just came out at 51% Approval despite the Fake News Media. They were one of the three most accurate on Election Day. Just about the most inaccurate were CNN and ABC News/Washington Post, and they haven't changed (get new pollsters). Much of the media is a Scam!*

In the first clause, Disclaim: Counter is expressed by means of "despite": even though the Fake News Media [lied], Rasmussen was able to obtain 51% approval. The second clause is a bare assertion, followed by a Disclaim: Deny move, in which DT declares that some media have not changed their "inaccurate" attitude. As happens quite regularly, the closing is Proclaim: Pronounce, also containing a highly negative Judgement of the media, here referred to as "Scam".

A similar rhetorical effect is obtained in the following tweet produced on Christmas Eve 2017, where other Engagement resources are used alongside the ones observed above:

> *Dec 24, 2017 08:48:11 AM The Fake News refuses to talk about how Big and how Strong our BASE is. They show Fake Polls just like they report Fake News. Despite only negative reporting, we are doing well - nobody is going to beat us. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!*

In the third sentence, Disclaim: Counter is again introduced by "Despite", and reinforced by the use of the personal deictic "We", which strategically seems to include both Trump himself and all his followers. Again, a Proclaim: Pronounce move – a slogan, in this case – closes the text. In the second clause, the verb "show" realises Attribution,[10] but disalignment from the actions of the media is realised by means of evaluative language ["Fake Polls", "Fake News"].

Examples of Proclaim: Pronounce can be found in the following tweets, unusually short and interpolated with other resources:

> *- Sep 30, 2017 02:56:46 PM @ricardorossello ......#Fake News critics are working overtime, but we're getting great marks from the people that truly matter! #PRStrong*

> *- Sep 30, 2017 01:04:59 PM Despite the Fake News Media in conjunction with the Dems, an amazing job is being done in Puerto Rico. Great people!*

---

[10] Generally, the reporting verb "show", similarly to the reporting verb "demonstrate", is used for conveying a particular stance (alignment) towards the attributed proposition, as in "In that book he showed that Linguistics is not just the study of form". However, DT in this tweet clearly uses "show" differently, i.e. with the aim of distancing himself from the Fake News apparatus, therefore it has been coded as Attribution: distance.

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

349

Both of them end with an exclamation mark ("truly matter!"; "Great people!") that sounds like an explicit authorial intervention aimed at ruling out contrary positions in the first tweet (the positions of the Fake News critics), and at praising the people of Porto Rico in the minor clause at the end of the second tweet. [11]

Generally speaking, when 'Expansion' is used, it signals recognition that there may be some who will not precisely share the writer's view on some matter (Martin and White, 2005: 106), therefore it can be seen as a resource that 'makes space' for other, different opinions/positions. In DT's corpus 'Expansion' is less present than contraction (19% versus 37%), but even when it is used it is not rarely 'narrowed down' by contracting resources or other strategies:

> - *Mar 6, 2018 07:55:35 AM The new Fake News narrative is that there is CHAOS in the White House. Wrong! People will always come & go, and I want strong dialogue before making a final decision. I still have some people that I want to change (always seeking perfection). There is no Chaos, only great Energy!*

Expanding resources here include adverbs like "always", "still", "always" (Entertain), as well as Attribution in the first clause. However, the Attribution is of the Distance type (indeed, DT refers to the report as "narrative"), and the word "Chaos" is capitalised. In addition, contracting resources are at work in the co-text, where a Proclaim: Pronounce move labels The Fake News narrative as "Wrong" in the second clause and, as often happens, Proclaim: Pronounce is repeated in the closing one (that contains a counter to the value position advanced by the Fake News media).

A similar example is reported in the following tweet, in which DT criticizes the media's hint that the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's would soon be dismissed:[12]

> *Dec 1, 2017 03:08:22 PM The media has been speculating that I fired Rex Tillerson or that he would be leaving soon – FAKE NEWS! He's not leaving and while we disagree on certain subjects, (I call the final shots) we work well together and America is highly respected again!*

The first sentence heteroglossically reports (Attribution) some content from the Media (the idea that DT has fired Rex Tillerson or that he might decide to quit his job soon), however the verb "speculating" clearly disassociates Trump from the report (Attribution: Distance). The second sentence is Proclaim: Pronounce, as usual realised by means of capital letters and an exclamation mark. The third sentence interpolates a Disclaim: Deny clause ("he is not leaving"), a Disclaim: Counter (even if sometimes they disagree, they work well together), and the usual closing Proclaim: Pronounce ("America is highly respected again!"). Interestingly enough, this is one of the very few tweets in which DT's more elaborate language comes closer to a 'written' style or at least to a style that reflects a text that has been written to be spoken: following other studies, we might speculate that DT is able to use a wide range of options in his stylistic features, according to the themes he is focusing on (Dawsey 2017; Wang & Liu 2017).

Limited space precludes further exemplification and explanation of the less frequently used Engagement types, however the most significant rhetorical features

[11] The tweet has been coded as Proclaim: pronounce, even if it is evident that a Disclaim: counter strategy is also at play here. In the author's view, however, the Pronounce move is stronger.

[12] Indeed, the secretary of state would be dismissed in March 2018.

construing a particular 'Engagement identity' have been outlined: a significantly high number of clauses in the corpus are bare assertions, and most of the heteroglossic resources are used in their 'Contract' subtype. Perhaps not surprisingly, 'Entertain' – usually realised by modal adjuncts like 'maybe' 'perhaps', 'probably' or by modal attributes like 'it is possible that', or by modal adjuncts of usuality - is very limited, possibly suggesting DT's inclination to fend off other positions.

By comparing the findings in this corpus with those by Quam J. and Ryshina-Pankova M. (2016), who analysed Engagement in longer speeches during the Presidential campaign, interesting similarities can be found: in their corpus, bare assertions play a crucial role by accounting for 54% of the total propositions. As far as heteroglossia is concerned, the most commonly used resources are Disclaim: Deny, Proclaim: Pronounce and Disclaim: Counter. In light of both studies findings, it is probably not an exaggeration to conclude that Trump's identity is construed in different discourse types by means of options that tend to tune down alternative positions, either by means of bare assertions, or by means of heteroglossic contracting resources like Counters, Denials and Pronounces.

4. Conclusion

This study is a preliminary attempt to describe DT's tweets by means of the Engagement system developed by Martin and White within the Sydney school of Systemic Functional Linguistics from 1998 onwards (Martin 2000; Martin and White 2005; White 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2006). The main aim has been to explore linguistically and discursively constructed strategies of alignment or disalignment in texts about fake news produced in the last few months of 2017 and first four months of 2018.

Starting from the assumption that Trump's use of the microblogging platform played in his favour already in the 2016 Presidential campaign by creating an echo-chamber in which his messages reverberated through the whole media environment and the public at large (Demata 2018), the present analysis has at least in part shown how the Engagement resources at work in the text corroborate empirical results discussed in other studies (Quam J. and Ryshina-Pankova M. 2016). This similarity may suggest that the peculiarity of DT's rhetorical moves is not primarily aimed at creating "ambient affiliation" within Twitter's echo-chamber, but is rather what might be called 'Engagement identity', namely a way of using the same alignment/disalignment resources regardless of the medium used.

In particular, it has been observed that Donald Trump privileges meaning-making choices that tend to 'shut down' dialogistic alternatives: mostly, but not only, bare assertions or contractive heteroglossic options. The former are mainly characterised by nominal groups expressing presupposition, a strategy aimed at connecting him with his followers, the latter by simple, straightforward, colloquial language that includes slang and insults directed at his opponents: as observed elsewhere, more formal and appropriate modes of expression may be rejected by DT in order not to align with "intellectualism and rationality of the elites" (Demata 2018, p. 74).

The Engagement moves deployed in the corpus are quite limited and repetitive, consisting mainly of Denials, Pronouncements, and Counters: this probably works to his advantage, as repetition can give the speaker an air of authority (Wang & Liu 2017, p. 154) and provoke an unconscious response of support among his followers (Lakoff 2016). In addition, tweets are generally characterised by monoglossic moves interspersed with

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

351

heteroglossic ones, mainly consisting of either: Denials of what has just been stated, or Pronouncements. This 'intermixing' strategy may produce the effect of directness and authenticity that, especially in the Pronouncement subtype, sounds like 'calls to actions' to his followers. However, this is not conducive to public debate, rather to a monologue-like diatribe in which Trump seems to 'shout out his truths' against all the media that are not aligned with him.

Due to the specific topic chosen for this study, most of the tweets contain the hashtag "#FakeNews", even though Trump's most used hashtag is "#MAGA", i.e. Make American Great Again or "#AmericaFirst". In line with the data collected in previous studies (Demata 2018), in this corpus DT's tendency to include the hashtag in the syntax of the tweet was observed. The effect of this is to increase the diffusion of the message in Twitter's "searchable talk", thus guaranteeing maximum resonance and contributing to Trump's populist style (Demata 2018, p. 79).

Future studies might consider using the same framework in order to investigate the Engagement strategies in larger corpora inside and outside Twitter and observe whether this trend can be confirmed or not. For the academic pleasure of linguists, there will certainly be no shortage of material as long as Donald Trump is around.

Bionote: Piergiorgio Trevisan is a lecturer at the University of Udine (Italy). He holds a PhD in Linguistics and Literature and has taught and written in the area of text analysis, including literary, promotional and multimodal texts. He has recently been involved in National Italian Projects investigating children's accessibility to multimodal texts, analysing in particular the barriers that may compromise literacy development in terms of text design and ideology. He has worked as a visiting scholar at the University of Sydney for two years, thanks to a 'Marie Curie Grant' from the European Commission.

Author's address: piergiorgio.trevisan@uniud.it

References

Austin J.L. 1962, *How to do things with words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Bakhtin M.M. 1981, *Discourse in the Novel*, in Holquist M. (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, pp. 259-422.

Biber D. and Finnegan E. 1988, *Adverbial stance types in English*, in "Discourse Processes" 11 [1], pp. 1-34.

Biber D. and Finnegan E. 1989, *Styles of stance in English: lexical and grammatical marking of evidentiality and affect*, in "Text" 9 [1], pp. 93-124.

Chafe W. 1986, *Evidentiality in English conversation and academic writing*, in Chafe W. and Nichols J. (eds.), *Evidentiality: the linguistic coding of epistemology*, Ablex, Norwood, N.J., pp. 261-272.

Dawsey J. 2017, *How Trump's disciplined speech came together*, in "Politico Magazine". http://www.politico.com/story///trump-speech-backstory-201703235552 (3.05.2018).

Demata M. 2018, *I think that maybe I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for twitter. Donald Trump's Populist Style on Twitter*, in "Textus" 31[1], pp. 67-90.

Golshan T. 2016, *Donald Trump's strange speaking style, as explained by linguists*, in "Vox". https://www.vox.com/2016/8/18/12423688/donald-trump-speech-style-explained-by-linguists (15.05.2018).

Halliday M.A.K., and Matthiessen C.M.I.M. 2004, *An introduction to functional grammar*, Arnold, London.

Hyland K. 1996, *Writing without conviction: hedging in science research articles*, in "Applied Linguistics" 17 [4], pp. 433-454.

Iyengar, S. 2005, *Speaking of values: The framing of American politics*, in "The Forum" 3 [3], pp. 1-8.

Krämer B 2017, *Populist Online Practices: The Function of the Internet in Right-wing Populism*, in "Information Communication & Society" 20 [9], pp. 1293-309.

Labov W. 1972, *The transformation of experience in narrative syntax*, in Ders (Ed),
 "Language in the inner city", Pennsylvania University Press, Philadelphia, pp. 354-390.

Labov W. 1984, *Intensity*, in Schiffrin D. (ed.), *Meaning, Form and Use in Context: linguistic applications*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., pp. 43-70

Lakoff G. 2004, *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate. The essential guide for progressives, including post-election updates*, Chelsea Green Publishing, Chelsea.

Lakoff G. 2016, *Understanding Trump*. https://georgelakoff.com/2016/07/23/understanding-trump-2 (22.05.2018).

Liberman M 2016, *The em-dash candidate*, in "Language Log". http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=27479 (15.05.2018).

Liberman M 2016, *The rhetorical style of spontaneous speech*, in "Language Log". http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=27515 (15.05.2018).

Martin, J. R. 2000, *Beyond exchange: APPRAISAL systems in English*, in S. Hunston and G. Thompson (eds), *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 142-175.

Martin J.R. and White P.P.R. 2005, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*, Palgrave, London.

Melchior C. and Romoli A. (eds.) 2018, *La strategia della persuasion*, Franco Angeli, Milano.

Miller, D.R. 2002, *Multiple judicial opinions as specialized sites of ENGAGEMENT: conflicting paradigms of valuation and legitimation in Bush v. Gore 2000*, in Gotti M., Heller D. and Dossena M. (eds.), *Conflict and negotiation in specialized texts,* Peter Lang, Bern, pp. 119-141.

Miller D.R. 2004, *"...to meet our common challenge": ENGAGEMENT strategies of alignment and alienation in current US international discourse*, in *"Textus"* 18 [1], pp. 39-62.

Napolitano A. and Aiezza M.C. 2018, *The Press War in the Post-Truth Era: A Corpus-Assisted CDA of the Discourse of US Political Analysts on Trump's Figure and Policy*, in "Textus" 31[1], pp. 91-117.

Norman M. 2016, *Whoever wins the US Presidential Election, We've Entered a Post-Truth World – There's No Going Back Now*, in "The Independent"*,* 8.11.2016. https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/us-election-2016-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-who-wins-post-truth-world-no-going-back-a7404826.html (16.05.2018).

Ott B. 2017, *The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement*, in "Critical Studies in Media Communication" 34 [1], pp. 59-68.

Oxford Dictionaries. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth (12.05.2018).

Tweeting engagement'. Strategies of identity construction and 'alignment-disalignment' in Donald Trump's use of social media

353

Page R. 2012, *The Linguistics of Self-branding and Micro-celebrity in Twitter: The Role of Hashtags*, in "Discourse of Communication" 6 [2], pp.181-201.

Pullum G. 2015, *Trump's aphasia*, in "Language Log". http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/ nll/?p=20490 (14.05.2018).

Quam J. and Ryshina-Pankova M. 2016, *"Let Me Tell You…": Audience Engagement Strategies in the Campaign Speeches of Trump, Clinton, and Sanders*, in "Russian Journal of Linguistics" 20 [4], pp. 140-160.

Simon-Vandenbergen A.M., White P.P.R. and Aijmer K. 2007, *Presupposition and 'taking-for-granted' in mass communicated political argument*, in Lauerbach G.E. and Fetzer A. (eds), *Political Discourse in the Media*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, pp. 31-74.

Sparks A. 2009, *Minstrel politics or "He speaks too well": Rhetoric, race, and resistance in the 2008 presidential campaign*, in "Argumentation and Advocacy" 46 [1], pp. 21-38.

Swift 2016, *Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low*. http://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx (18.05.2018).

Wang Y. and Liu H. 2017, *Is Trump always rambling like a fourth-grade student? An analysis of stylistic features of Donald Trump's political discourse during the 2016 election*, in "Discourse & Society" 29 [3], pp. 140-160.

Westen D. 2008, *The political brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation*, Public Affairs, New York.

White, P.R.R. 1998, *Telling Media Tales: The News Story as Rhetoric*, Ph.D dissertation, Sydney, University of Sydney.

White, P.R.R. 2000, *Dialogue and inter-subjectivity: Reinterpreting the semantics of modality and hedging*, in Coulthard M., Cotterill J. and Rock F. (eds), *Working With Dialogue*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, pp. 67–80.

White, P.R.R. 2002. *Appraisal–the language of evaluation and stance*, in J. Verschueren, J.-O. Östman, J. Blommaert and J. and C. Bulcaen (eds), *Handbook of Pragmatics*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 1–27.

White, P.R.R. 2003, *Beyond modality and hedging: A dialogic view of the language of intersubjective stance*, in "Text" 23 [2], pp. 259-284.

White, P.R.R. 2006, *Evaluative semantics and ideological positioning in journalistic discourse – a new framework for analysis*, in Lassen, I. (ed.), *Mediating Ideology in Text and Image: Ten Critical Studies*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 37–68

Zappavigna M. 2012, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*, Continuum, London-New York.