

THE 2019 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS AND STACEY ABRAMS' REBUTTAL A deferred dialogic exchange

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Abstract – A favoured communicative opportunity of Donald Trump was the State of the Union Address, which was widely broadcast across the contemporary mediascape, including via YouTube. Traditionally, the SOTU address is followed by a rebuttal speech from a representative of the opposition party, and in 2019 the speaker for the Democrats was Stacey Abrams, the first African American woman to deliver a rebuttal speech. This heteroglossic dialogic confrontation was further amplified by the simultaneous fact-checking of the news media, thus presenting the audience/s with a complex diachronic speech event. Indeed, the rich affordances of our polymedia environment critically engage the cognitive levels of human interaction and information exchange, leading to forms of bounded rationality, such as cognitive heuristics. Against this fluid background, the research purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, it evaluates the success of presidential rhetoric in the 2019 SOTU address, which aimed at projecting a renovated image of the desired unity of values and goals at a national level. Secondly, it comparatively considers the different qualities of the rhetoric of the SOTU and the rebuttal speech, as well as the media reaction. The analytical foci will be on both speakers' attitudinal positionings by utilising the fine-grained resources of the appraisal framework (White 2015), with insights from Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, on their discursive strategies and topoi, following a broad discourse-historical approach (Reisigl 2017; Wodak 2015), as well as on the pragmatic aspects of such exchanges, which were finalised to gain political consensus.

Keywords: SOTU; fact-checking; rebuttal; mediascape affordances; appraisal framework.

1. Introduction and aims

The fast-paced development of converged communication technologies across the porous space of the World Wide Web has several implications for the “ways interpersonal communication is enacted and experienced” at the socio-affective and emotional levels, as Madianou and Miller (2012) showed in the development of their theory of polymedia as an integrated structure. From a pragmatic perspective, which is entailed in the analysis of political discourse where language is (declaredly) used for influencing people, it is apparent how political speeches (from institutional discourses to grassroots communication) can encompass a variety of settings, participants, aims, actions and references to shared societal notions and cognitive styles that increasingly unfold through hybrid, multi-layered cross-media interfaces.

This plurality of channels allows users to define the level and domain of the discussion in terms of either interpersonal relations or socio-political/cultural interactions (etc.), or else as a mechanism of promoting one's public persona and decisions – as famously demonstrated by Donald Trump's polymedia communication style, which included tweets.

In line with McLuhan's central formulation that "the medium is the message"¹ and that the message is "the change of scale or pace or pattern" that a new medium introduces (McLuhan 1964), Twitter enabled Trump to develop a sort of catch-up hybrid dialogic exchange with his followers. Apparently, Twitter was Trump's favourite form of social media, and given the possible resonance of his tweets (@realDonaldTrump – 74.6 million followers; @POTUS – 28.6 million), he had the opportunity of expressing his opinions to a global audience in real time without the intermediation of the professional news media. Another favoured communicative opportunity of the former president (henceforth simply 'president' for brevity) was the State of the Union (SOTU) address, which was widely broadcast, including via YouTube. Traditionally, the SOTU address is followed by a rebuttal speech from a representative of the opposition party (in 2019 the Democratic speaker was Stacey Abrams), which is gaining increasing attention.

The president's communications have frequently raised hot debates and, apart from the opposite party's response, 'fact-checking' has become the inevitable counterpoint. In the US, political fact-checking was inescapable during the 2016 presidential race, as explained by Graves and Cherubini (2016, pp. 6-7), and the US election (as well as the Brexit referendum) prompted the coining of terms such as 'post-fact' or the 'post-truth' age. In Graves and Cherubini's report, the first organisations dedicated to evaluating the veracity of political assertions appeared in the US in the early 2000s and then gradually emerged on every continent, attached to either established news media or, more frequently, as independent ventures or projects of a civil society organisation. Yet even simple 'facts'² leave scope for controversy, especially when political fact-checking is at stake.

From 2016 onwards, a large number of professional journalists who were opposed to Trump's views and decisions were engaged in producing and broadcasting virtually real-time fact-checks in a kind of polarised dialogue. These included online versions with relatively recent video affordances that enabled the SOTU address to be viewed while being interspersed with fact checks (Law 2019; Politico 2019a). We can say that these journalists tried to institutionalise Paul Grice's well-known truth maxim (i.e., don't say what you believe to be false, or for which you don't have adequate evidence) at the level of national discourse.

The plurality of the affordances of our media environment critically engages the cognitive levels of human interaction and information exchange. To locate trustworthy information through the multiplicity of sources, embedded links and channel convergence has become a daunting task. As more information has migrated online, a process of pragmatic 'disintermediation' has forced individuals to evaluate vast amounts of online information on their own (Messing, Westwood 2012; Metzger, Flanagin 2013), without the guidance of traditional experts. In seeking to find an optimal balance between cognitive effort and desired outcomes, one form of bounded rationality has emerged – *satisficing*, which is when Internet information consumers resort to cognitive heuristics (CH, Tversky, Kahneman 1982) to minimise their cognitive effort and time (in this case, the time they should invest in checking the truth of politicians' claims). CH can lead us to ignore a number of problematic aspects and, eventually, to form cognitive biases, e.g. self-confirmation bias, expectancy violation, persuasive intent, etc. Indeed, people not

¹ Concisely, inasmuch as the medium shapes the user's perception of the message or delivers otherwise unavailable content.

² This entails complex issues such as what counts as (reliable) data and, ultimately, the awareness that 'facts' are social constructs within power relationships.

infrequently navigate the media environment to reinforce their own realities/biases to the neglect of a shared reality.

Against this multi-layered background, the research purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, it evaluates the effectiveness of presidential rhetoric in the 2019 SOTU, which aimed at projecting a renovated image of the desired unity of values and goals at a national level. Secondly, it comparatively investigates the different qualities of the rhetoric of the SOTU address and the rebuttal speech; the analytical foci will be on both speakers' attitudinal positioning and discursive strategies. The ensuing research question is to assess how effective/persuasive Trump's announced effort to "break decades of political stalemate, bridge old divisions, heal old wounds, build new coalitions, [and] forge new solutions" has been considered in the news. To better assess both speeches' impact, the study considers data for the global online news coverage of the 2019 SOTU address retrieved from the GDELT Project database (Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone, see n.11) and the polls conducted immediately after the speech by TV networks, such as CNN. Examples from the copious, nearly simultaneous fact-checks are also provided.

2. Background – The SOTUs and the rebuttals

The purpose of the yearly State of the Union address delivered in January or February in the House Chamber by the President of the USA to a Joint Session of Congress is to give the administration's view of the state of the nation. The president highlights their achievements, and then sets out their plans for the country and the legislative agenda for the next year. As the US Constitution states, the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient" (Art. II, Section 3, Clause 1). The first SOTU address (833 words) was delivered by George Washington in 1790 in New York (the nation's capital at the time). Subsequently, from 1801 to 1912, presidents sent only a written statement to Congress for their SOTU address until Woodrow Wilson addressed Congress in person in 1913, and in 1922 Warren Harding became the first president to broadcast his speech live on the radio. From the late 1940s onwards, the SOTUs was shown live on TV, and recently it has also been broadcast live on social media.

The number of presidential addresses remained low until the early twentieth century and rose sharply after 1945, reaching a peak of one speech per day under Carter's presidency (Hart 1984), owing to the growing importance of journalists, the media, and television in particular. Their content and style have evolved during the last two centuries since, in our communication-based society, speaking persuasively is an essential component of governing, and the president must convince Congress as well as the citizens of the rightfulness of his choices and decisions (Neustadt 1990). In pragmatic terms, we can observe how the general cognitive, social and cultural perspective has been moving towards a wider inclusiveness.

In a recent study on the style and rhetoric of the American presidents (Savoy 2017), which covers more than two centuries (from 1789 to 2017), all the annual SOTUs were analysed. The data show how, over the decades, the mean sentence length became shorter and the vocabulary simpler with a preference for common words/phrases to reach out to an increasingly wide audience.

Accordingly, the presidential rhetoric has evolved towards:

a more assertive and intimate tone with an increase in the occurrence of pronouns, particularly with the lemma *we*. [...] When inspecting all presidents, some figures show a distinct break with their predecessors such as Lincoln, T. Roosevelt, Wilson, F.D. Roosevelt, or Kennedy. A closer analysis of presidencies since 1961 reveals that, with time, governmental speeches include more words related to humans and emotional terms, as well as references to God and symbolic expressions (*America, country, freedom*). (Savoy 2017, p. 55)

From Savoy's quali-quantitative data, it can be inferred that *pathos*, rather than *ethos* and *logos*, has moved into the foreground in presidential oratory through the greater inclusion of religious vocabulary, references to family and human beings, story-telling, assertiveness, and optimistic visions of the future. The names and personal histories of patriots (war heroes, etc.) are frequently included in Trump's speeches in his effort to establish a kind of dialogic connection with as large an audience as possible and to negotiate common ground by mentioning shared/shareable values – to name just one example, 'America first'.

Within the fertile research domain of presidential rhetoric, Trump's style has attracted considerable attention and critique, with foci on his demagogic capacities (Mercieca 2020), the versatility of white supremacy rhetoric (Sanchez 2018) and the negative effect of his rhetoric on minorities (Luqman 2018), his relationship with the executive branch and the media (Ross, Rivers 2020; Stuckey 2021), particularly with regard to Twitter (Kus 2020), and other aspects. More pertinently for the present research, Kayam (2018) showed how Trump, following the trend of anti-intellectualism, used readability and simplicity as a rhetorical strategy to win popularity.

Trump's widely-broadcasted second SOTU address (delivered on February 5, 2019 at 9 p.m. in the House of Representatives) took place in a critical moment in US politics, marked by the month-long government shutdown and the president's conflictual relationship with Congress. Yet it was much more successful than the 2020 SOTU (February 4) that ended with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi ripping her copy of his address into pieces, strongly dissenting with what she considered to be populist rhetoric deployed to endorse untrue declarations, which was not the customary response to a SOTU address. In pragmatic terms, she went beyond performative utterances and resorted to a performative action.

According to a long-standing tradition, a (verbal) response is given to SOTUs by a representative (or representatives) of the opposition party. The Democratic response to the 2019 SOTU was delivered by Stacey Abrams, who served in the Georgia House of Representatives from 2006 to 2017,³ and thus became the first African American woman to deliver a rebuttal speech. This practice gained the public's attention in 1966 when, after Lyndon B. Johnson's SOTU address, the Republican leaders Everett Dirksen and Gerald Ford recorded a 30-minute televised rebuttal in the Old Senate Chamber. Over the decades, the response's format has ranged from a pre-recorded 45-minute TV programme or call-in show to its present form of a televised speech that is discussed nearly as much as the presidential address itself.

The choice of Abrams for the 2019 Democratic rebuttal speech intrinsically foregrounds issues of gender/racial identities and a different perspective on American values. For example, Abrams called the partial government shutdown "a stunt engineered by the President of the United States, one that defied every tenet of fairness and

³ Independent Senator Bernie Sanders and Jeff Hewitt (Libertarian Party) also delivered their own responses to the 2019 SOTU, while California Attorney General Xavier Becerra gave the Spanish-language response.

abandoned not just our people – but our values.”⁴ In this vein, unlike Trump, she considers matters like individual liberties and justice, gun violence, voter suppression and climate change, as synoptically illustrated below.

Donald Trump	Stacey Abrams
Trade	Gun violence and justice
Health care	Trade
Immigration	Immigration
Foreign policy	Health care
Economy	Climate change
Taxes	Voter suppression
Infrastructure	
Defence	

Table 1
Main topics at a glance.

As we shall see below (section 4), Abrams' clear, concise speech outlined an alternative vision, based on her selection of different topics, and was also addressed to those Republicans who share many Democratic values.

The sequence of these two events, both widely broadcast and subject to fact-checking, created a kind of heteroglossic deferred dialogic confrontation, yet, through the affordances of our mediascape, such a confrontation can be experienced as a real-time exchange.

3. Methodology

The analysis of a complex info-propaganda discourse (the SOTU), which features socio-political issues, negotiates the executive agenda, and aims at engaging as wide an audience as possible, required an integrated approach that, from a pragmatic perspective, combined the resources provided by the discourse-historical approach (DHA) with the fine-grained linguistic analyses made possible by the appraisal framework (AF).

3.1. Shared concerns of pragmatics and discourse analysis

Speech acts are a typical area of intersection that discourse analysis shares with pragmatics. Coming closer to the subject of the present investigation, which concerns the highly goal-oriented political communication,

The rejection of a **state-of-the-nation address** may destroy a president's political future and may have consequences for a country and its inhabitants. Reporting on inflation may result in specific patterns of buying and selling. This aspect was referred to as the '**perlocutionary effects**' of a speech act by Austin. (Verschuere 2001, pp. 84-85, my bold)

Furthermore, pragmatics is concerned with the notion of relevance (Sperber, Wilson 1986/1995, 2006) and the applicable social principles of discourse, such as the widely investigated cooperative (Grice 1975) and politeness principles (Brown, Levinson 1987;

⁴ Materials and fact checks can be retrieved from, among other sources, Gore 2019, Politico 2019b and Stolberg 2019.

Leech 1983). The theory of relevance, with its major foci on the attention, memory, saliency and the coding/decoding of information, typically pertains to psychological and cognitive studies (see, among others, Berger, Roloff 1980; Fecteau, Munoz 2006; Humphreys, Garry 2000), and its basic tenet is that human cognition is organised to maximise relevance.

Yet, the notion of relevance has increasingly been utilised in communication studies and linguistics as well. More recently, within the journalism literature, journalists' sense of *newsworthiness* is contrasted with the audience's perspective on *noteworthiness*, i.e. *relevance* vs *interestingness* (Barchas-Lichtenstein *et al.* 2021). In their words, "Journalists may frame stories to highlight their relevance to some particular audience, and news users may make additional personal connections that are not explicit in the story, or that emerge only in talk with others." Accordingly, relevance is cooperatively and discursively constructed, and the news media project

the 'generic personhood' of viewers through pronouns, participation structures, and normative ideologies of sincerity, and Molek-Kozakowska (2016: 5) reminds us that 'events are not always intrinsically newsworthy, but can be constructed as newsworthy with specific application of images and linguistic devices.' Similarly, discursive news values analysis focuses on journalistic texts as the **locus of these values** (e.g., Bednarek, 2016; Bednarek and Caple, 2012; 2014). [...] At one extreme, the pronouns I, me, and my are the most common method of individual self-reference [through which people locate the self as a member of groups of varying size and scale]. (ivi, my bold)

Predictably, the definitions of relevance are context-dependent to some extent. As concerns the US Presidents' state-of-the-nation addresses, we can agree that such speeches display both an overall pragmatic intensity and *newsworthiness/noteworthiness* for the US news media and national audience. There is also literature that deals with presidential speeches in terms of speech acts, politeness strategies, etc. (among others, Al-Hindawi, Al-Aadili 2017; Balogun, Murana 2018; Gusthini *et al.* 2018), which may be politically tinged to varying extents. For the purpose of the present study, a more general emphasis on relevance (*newsworthiness/noteworthiness*) was deemed proper to highlight the shaping of the socio-political issues (TOPOI) at stake and their loci, as well as the discursive strategies at work, through the discourse-historical approach and the resources of the appraisal framework.

3.2. The discourse-historical approach

Concisely, the discourse-historical approach (see e.g. Reisigl 2017; Wodak 2001, 2011, 2015) deploys historical, socio-political and linguistic perspectives, unveiling discrimination and racist attitudes in discourse-analytical terms.⁵ Wetherell and Potter (1992) showed how the investigation of stereotypes, institutional practices, discriminatory actions in relation to racism, also needs to take into account discursive patterns of signification/representation. The DHA was also grounded in van Dijk's model (1977, 1984) with the heuristic assistance it provided in linking the generation of prejudice to larger discursive units than the sentence: the collectively shared beliefs of a society are

⁵ This concise account of the DHA is abridged and distilled from Abbamonte 2018, pp. 160-163.

stored and organised as attitudes and, as such, are fitted into group schemata that provide the cognitive basis of our information processing about members of out-groups.

To varying extents, political discourses, such as SOTUs and the related responses, exploit group schemata and rely on shared beliefs to negotiate common ground with the target audiences and to achieve consensus. In sum, DHA perceives discourse as a form of social practice, i.e. as a complex of interrelated context-dependent semiotic acts that are situated within specific fields of social practice (Reisigl, Wodak 2015). This comprehensive approach seeks to complement the cognitive models with an analysis of the social and historical context (Mitten, Wodak 1993; Wodak and Reisigl 2009, 2015) through an adaptive, problem-oriented approach that investigates the orators' discursive and argumentative strategies, their purposes, and the topics/issues at stake. In Wodak's own words,

I approach *topos* (pl. *topoi*) as a rhetorical and dialectical scheme that offers the opportunity for a systematic in-depth analysis of different arguments and statements that represent the accepted knowledge – *endoxon* – and which are usually employed by orators or opponents to persuade their audience of the validity of their opinions. (Wodak 2016, p. 8, my bold)

To give some examples, in political addresses, orators often utilise themes drawn from the history of their nations, shaping them according to the audience's expectations. Thus, in his 2019 SOTU address, Trump emphatically recalled the greatness of recent American history (e.g., from Table 2, 'Here with us tonight are three of those incredible heroes, [...] Gentlemen, we salute you', etc.) and its present glory (e.g., 'there's nothing anywhere in the world that can compete with America', etc.), thus using the 'topos of history' to enthuse the public and share the pride of being American.

From Abrams' rebuttal, we can see an example of the 'topos of reality': 'Growing up, my family went back and forth between lower middle class and working class. Yet, even when they came home weary and bone-tired, my parents found a way to show us all who we could be' (see Table 5). Abrams is here bringing to the fore the reality of her life experience and resilience. The occurrence of other *topoi* (Justice, Challenge, Threat, etc.) will be indicated in Tables 2 and 5.

3.3. The appraisal framework

In this study, resources from the 2020 version of the AF (The Language of Attitude, Arguability and Interpersonal positioning) by P.R.R. White will be utilised. This is the updated version of the 2005 AF by James Martin and P.R.R. White, and both amount to a taxonomy of semantic resources and interpersonal positionings, grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics, with insights from Bakhtin's notions of dialogism, heteroglossia and the pre-eminence of the context (elaborated in the 1930s).⁶ It is worth mentioning some of Vološinov's specific remarks on dialogue to give an idea of such dynamics:

The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychological act of its implementation, but the

⁶ Typically, dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia: words and phrases do not occur in a vacuum and their meanings are the result of constant interactions with and reciprocal influences between other meanings. The forces of heteroglossia and dialogism ensure the primacy of context over text. Conversely, undialogised (monoglossic) language ignores the heteroglossic diversity associated with all utterances to the effect of being authoritative or absolute (Bakhtin 1981).

social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances. Thus, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language. *Dialogue [...] can also be understood in a broader sense, meaning not only direct, face-to-face, vocalised verbal communication between persons, but also verbal communication of any type whatsoever.* A book, i.e., a verbal performance in print, is also an element of verbal communication [... that] inevitably orients itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere [...]. Thus the printed verbal performance engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of a large scale: it responds to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on. (Vološinov 1995, p. 139, my italics)

Thus, from this perspective, ‘dialogue’ is not only a matter of questions and answers or other types of face-to-face verbal communication, but can also include deferred dialogic exchanges. Accordingly, in terms of the present study, the overarching dimension to consider is the way this complex and noteworthy communicative event unfolds, as its components comprise both Trump’s SOTU and Abrams’ rebuttal, as well as the journalistic fact checks and commentaries.

The AF’s resources can be useful for investigating the different attitudes displayed in this event, since its major analytical foci are (concisely) on:

- how *attitudes* and emotive responses are explicitly presented/worded or implied,
- how *judgements* on people or other speakers, happenings and states of affairs are passed and thereby form *alliances* with those who share those views and distance themselves from those who do not,
- how the expression of such attitudes and judgements is, in many instances, carefully managed to take into account the possibility of *challenge or contradiction*,
- the *linguistic basis of differences* in a writer’s/speaker’s ‘style’ (more/less deferential, dominating, in/expert, cautious, conciliatory, engaged, im/personal, etc.),
- how different genres and text types may conventionally employ different evaluative and otherwise *rhetorical strategies* (in journalism, media and corporate communication, political discourse, advertising, etc.),
- the underlying, often covert value systems disseminated by a speaker’s/writer’s utterances and their assumptions about the *value and belief systems* of their intended audiences,
- the construction of textual personas, and
- how different modes of *story-telling* can be characterised by their different uses of the resources of evaluation (abridged and distilled from White 2020).

A selection of these resources was used in this study, as these can better highlight, in combination with the analytical foci of the DHA, the president’s and Abrams’ *attitudinal positioning*. The resources of attitude (Affect, Judgement and Appreciation) were thus utilised.

It is worth noting that the distinctions between Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are not always clear-cut; e.g., things can not only be appreciated (positively/negatively), they can also be judged (‘deceptive software’). Additionally, ‘values of Affect often have a potential to provoke Judgment [...; e.g.] to state, “He hates the weak and the vulnerable” is to provoke a Judgment of impropriety, since the culture strongly associates such a moral evaluation with such an affectual stance. To state, “He adores his children” is likely to provoke a positive Judgment for the same reasons’ (White 2001, p. 4).

In the present case – the analysis of, firstly, the SOTU address, though not as reported by journalists but as delivered by Donald Trump, and, secondly, Stacey Abrams’ rebuttal – Attitudinal positioning appeared to be the more suitable set of resources, as

attitudinal values are directly expressed. Concisely, Trump's second SOTU address was delivered on February 5, 2019, at 9 p.m. in the House of Representatives in a triumphant mood, and it prioritised the US success and glory under his administration. Abrams' rebuttal – delivered later that same night in a different and less prestigious location – responded to the SOTU with a friendly calm and outlined constructive criticisms from a different standpoint (touching on key Democratic positions) in a communicative style that aimed at empathising with the audience, thus creating a heteroglossic diversity of voices. Other styles, voices and stances can be found in journalistic fact checks.

4. Analysis of the speeches

4.1. Extracts from the SOTU address and comments

For brevity's sake, and to avoid analytical repetition, only verbatim excerpts from the 2019 SOTU (a total of 5,460 words) are included in the tables below, amounting to 1,273 words. The video of the speech has been widely circulated. Both the video and the full transcript are available via many online sources.⁷ The excerpts are categorised according to the notions in the legend below.

Discourse approach	historical	Appraisal framework ⁸
TOPOI		Attitude
BURDENING REALITY NUMBERS HISTORY AUTHORITY THREAT DEFINITION JUSTICE URGENCY CHALLENGE		<i>Affect</i> (positive+ negative--) <i>Judgement</i> + --: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity, tenacity • Propriety^{Pr}, veracity^{Vr} • Normality* <i>Appreciation</i> + --
Discursive strategies		
PREDICATION/NOMINATION REFERENTIAL PERSPECTIVATION ARGUMENTATION INTENSIFICATION/MITIGATION		

Legend

Discourse historical approach	Appraisal framework annotation
Topoi of DEFINITION & HISTORY	Madam Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, the First

⁷ See <http://time.com/5521860/2019-state-of-the-union-trump-transcript>, among many other sources.

⁸ The description of the resources for evaluation in English in the AF is rich and multi-layered, as can be appreciated by looking at the synoptic contents of the 'framed version' at <https://www.grammatics.com/appraisal/appraisaloutline/framed/frame.htm>. It is feasible to utilise more resources for textual analysis at the same time by highlighting the different evaluative and discursive features cohesively interacting within the same text. Yet, for readability's sake, when annotating a text, it is expedient to select the more functional set of descriptors, which in this case was Attitude, with its sub-systems: Judgement, Appreciation and Affect. Some overlapping, e.g. between positive Affect and positive Appreciation, may occur. Furthermore, annotation is clearer when it is selective; in other words, if every noticeable word is highlighted, the effect can be confusing.

<p>REFERENTIAL strategy</p> <p>Comment: inclusive introduction, with the effect of engaging/aligning the addressees</p>	<p>Lady of the United States and <i>my fellow Americans</i>. We meet tonight in a moment of <i>unlimited potential</i> as we begin a new Congress. I stand here ready to work^{Pr} with you⁺ to achieve historic breakthroughs for all Americans. Millions of <i>our fellow citizens</i> are watching us now gathered in this great chamber, <i>hoping we will govern not as two parties, but as one nation⁺</i>.</p>
<p>Topoi of URGENCY & CHALLENGE</p> <p>REFERENTIAL strategy</p> <p>Comment: in-group alignment, inclusiveness (us, our)</p>	<p>The agenda I will lay out this evening is not a Republican agenda or a Democrat agenda, <i>it's the agenda^{Pr} of the American people⁺</i>. Many of us have campaigned on the same core promises to defend American jobs⁺ and demand fair trade for American workers, to rebuild and <i>revitalize⁺</i> our nation's infrastructure, to <u>reduce the price⁺</u> of health care and prescription drugs, to create an <u>immigration system that is safe, lawful, modern and secure⁺</u> and to pursue a foreign policy that puts <i>America's interests first⁺</i>. There is a new opportunity in American politics if only we have the courage together to seize it.</p>
<p>Topoi of HISTORY & NUMBERS</p> <p>REFERENTIAL, NOMINATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: shared memory/values; direct address, inclusiveness (us)</p>	<p>This year, America will recognize two important anniversaries that show us <i>the majesty of America's mission and the power of American pride⁺</i>. In June, we mark 75 years since the start of what General Dwight D. Eisenhower called the great crusades, the allied liberation in Europe. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, 15,000 young American men jumped from the sky and 60,000 more stormed in from the sea to save our civilization from tyranny. <i>Here with us tonight are three of those incredible heroes</i>, Private First Class Joseph Riley, Staff Sergeant Irving Locker and Sergeant Herman Zeitchiek. Gentlemen, we salute you.</p>
<p>Topoi of HISTORY, CHALLENGE & BURDEN</p> <p>REFERENTIAL, NOMINATION, PERSPECTIVATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: in group alignment, direct address, inclusiveness (we/our)</p>	<p>In 2019, we also celebrate 50 years since <i>brave young pilots⁺</i> flew a quarter of a million miles through space to plant the American flag on the face of the moon. Half a century later, we are joined by one of the Apollo 11 astronauts who planted that flag, Buzz Aldrin. Thank you, Buzz. American astronauts will go back to space on American rockets.</p> <p>In the 20th century, America saved freedom,^{Pr} redefined the middle class* and when you get down to it, there's nothing anywhere in the world that can compete with America.</p> <p>Victory is not winning for our party. Victory is winning for our country.</p> <p>Now <i>we must step boldly and bravely into the next chapter⁺</i> of this next <i>great American adventure⁺</i> and we must create a new standard of living for the new 21st century. An <i>amazing quality of life⁺</i> for all of our American citizens is within reach.</p>
<p>Topoi of CHALLENGE, URGENCY, HISTORY & NUMBERS</p> <p>PERSPECTIVATION, NOMINATION, ARGUMENTATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: claiming and counterclaiming, negotiating common ground</p>	<p>Over the last two years, my administration has moved with urgency and historic speed to confront problems neglected-- by leaders of both parties over many decades. In just over two years, since the election, we have launched an unprecedented economic boom, a boom that has rarely been seen before. There's been nothing like it. We have created 5.3 million new jobs and, importantly, added 600,000 new manufacturing jobs, <u>something which almost everyone said was impossible to do</u>. But the fact is, we are just getting started. Wages are rising at the fastest pace in decades and growing for blue collar workers, who I promised to fight for, faster than anyone else. Nearly 5 million Americans have been lifted off food stamps.</p>
<p>Topoi of AUTHORITY, DEFINITION, CHALLENGE & NUMBERS</p> <p>ARGUMENTATION, INTENSIFICATION strategies</p>	<p>More people are working now than at any time in the history of our country – 157 million.</p> <p>We passed <i>a massive tax cut⁺</i> for working families and doubled the child tax credit.</p> <p>We virtually ended the estate tax or death tax, as it is often called, on small businesses, for ranches and also for family farms.</p> <p>We eliminated the very unpopular Obamacare individual mandate</p>

<p>Comment: construction of out-groups</p> <p>Comment: construction of in-groups</p>	<p>penalty. And to give critically ill patients access to life-saving cures, we passed – very importantly – the right to try.</p> <p>My administration has cut more regulations++ in a short period of time than any other administration during its entire tenure.</p> <p>Companies are coming back to our country in large numbers++ thanks to our historic reductions in taxes and regulations.</p>
<p>Topoi of JUSTICE & AUTHORITY</p> <p>PERSPECTIVATION, INTENSIFICATION, NOMINATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: engagement + direct address, story-telling</p>	<p>And just weeks ago both parties united for groundbreaking criminal justice reform. They said it couldn't be done.</p> <p>Last year, I heard through friends the story of Alice Johnson. I was deeply moved.+ In 1997, Alice was sentenced to life in prison as a first-time nonviolent drug offender. Over the next 22 years she became a prison minister, <i>inspiring others to choose a better path</i>.+ She had a big impact on that prison population+ and far beyond. [...] In June, I commuted Alice's sentence, when I saw Alice's beautiful family greet her at the prison gates hugging and kissing and crying and laughing, I knew I did something right. Alice is with us tonight and she is a terrific woman. Terrific. Alice, please.</p>
<p>Topoi of NUMBERS, AUTHORITY, THREAT, JUSTICE & URGENCY</p> <p>PERSPECTIVATION, ARGUMENTATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: defining the boundary between in-group (we, our) and out-group (their, them)</p>	<p>We have just heard that Mexican cities in order to remove the <u>illegal immigrants--</u> from their communities are getting trucks and buses to bring them up to our country in areas where there is little border protection. I have ordered another 3,750 troops to our southern border to prepare for this tremendous onslaught. Tens of thousands of <i>innocent Americans+</i> are killed by <i>lethal drugs that cross our border and flood--</i> into our cities, including meth, heroin, cocaine and fentanyl. The savage gang--, MS-13, now operates in at least 20 different American states and they almost all come through our Southern border.</p> <p>This is a <u>moral issue</u>. The lawless state of our southern border is a threat to the safety-- and security and financial well-being of all America. We have a moral duty to create an immigration system that protects the lives and jobs of our citizens. This includes our obligation to the millions of immigrants living here today who followed the rules and respected our laws^{Pr}. Legal immigrants enrich our nation in countless ways.</p> <p>So let's work together, compromise* and reach a deal^{Pr} that will truly make America safe.</p>
<p>Topoi of REALITY, NUMBERS & HISTORY</p> <p>NOMINATION strategy</p> <p>Comment: direct address, asides, engagement, jocular register</p>	<p>As we work to defend our people's safety, we must also ensure our economic resurgence continues at a rapid pace. No one has benefited more from our thriving economy than women, who have filled 58 percent of the newly created jobs last year.</p> <p>[Applause, cheers]</p> <p><i>You weren't supposed to do that.</i> + [laughter]</p> <p><i>Thank you very much. Thank you very much.</i> +</p> <p>All Americans can be proud that we have more women in the workforce than ever before^{Pr}.</p> <p>[Applause]</p> <p><i>Don't sit yet. You're going to like this.</i>+ And exactly one century after Congress passed the constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote, we also have more women serving in Congress than at any time before.</p> <p>[Applause, cheers]</p>
<p>Topoi of HISTORY, DEFINITION, CHALLENGE</p> <p>INTENSIFICATION, REFERENTIAL (in-group), NOMINATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: widening the common</p>	<p>This is the time <i>to reignite the American imagination+</i>. This is the time to search for the <i>tallest summit and set our sights on the brightest star</i>. This is the time to rekindle the bonds of love and loyalty and memory that link us together as citizens, as neighbors, as patriots+. This is our future, our fate, and our choice to make. I am asking you to choose greatness. No matter the trials we face, no matter the challenges to come, we must go forward together. We must keep America first in our hearts [...]. We must keep freedom</p>

context, inclusive pronouns, deontics, religious vocabulary	alive in our souls. And we must always keep faith in America's destiny. That one nation under God must be the hope and the promise and the light and the glory among all the nations of the world. Thank you, God bless you. And God bless America. Thank you very much.
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Table 2
Verbatim excerpts from Donald Trump's 2019 SOTU address with added DHA comments and AF emphases.

Discussion. The rhetoric of Trump's speech is in line with the tendencies outlined in section 2: the use of short sentences, inclusive pronouns, simple words, naming, story-telling and religious vocabulary. As indicated in Table 2, the speech revolves around the typical topoi identified by the DHA, giving relevance to America's destiny/history ('to achieve historic breakthroughs') as a success story ('tonight in a moment of unlimited potential'), especially from the economic perspective ('thanks to our historic reductions in taxes and regulations'), certain challenges notwithstanding. The barren patches ('the very unpopular Obamacare') are apparently due to Democratic or socialist incompetence.

The complex issue of migration is mainly framed as a threat to be urgently dealt with ('I have ordered another 3,750 troops to our southern border to prepare for this tremendous onslaught [... against the] savage gang'). As Stopfner (2021: 308) observed, while considering "the rise (and fall) of right-wing populist parties and politicians [... e.g.] Donald Trump in the United States [... the focus is] on a horizontal distinction between 'us' and 'others', i.e., foreigners and other minority groups based on ethnicity, religion etc". Here, the distinction is between 'savage' migrants and 'thousands of innocent Americans'.

The general tonality of Trump's speech is triumphalistic, with an emphasis on the heroic dimension, as embodied by well-known invited guests (Private First Class Joseph Riley, Staff Sergeant Irving Locker, etc.). The burden of the successful (white) man⁹ is enthusiastically presented ('Now we must step boldly and bravely into the next chapter'). His textual persona is represented as the positive agent and catalyst in this progress, and, in terms of appraisal, the main emphasis is on the virtues of capacity and tenacity ('I stand here ready to work with you to achieve historic breakthroughs'; 'my administration has moved with urgency and historic speed to confront problems neglected... we have launched an unprecedented economic boom'). There is also space for jocularity, such as when he announces the datum that women 'filled 58 percent of the newly created jobs last year', after which the women in the audience, who wore 'suffragette white' as a form of protest, cheered.

4.2. Extracts from the 2019 rebuttal speech and comments

Verbatim excerpts from Abrams' rebuttal (a total of 1,498 words) are included in Table 5 below, amounting to 785 words.

⁹ It is a typical definition inspired to the poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899), by Rudyard Kipling, where imperialism was depicted as a positive force in the process of 'civilisation' of the non-white world.

Discourse historical approach	Appraisal framework annotation
<p>NOMINATION strategy</p> <p>Unlike Trump, Abrams needs to introduce herself to her audience.</p> <p>Comment: inclusive pronoun, engagement</p>	<p>Good evening, my fellow Americans, and happy Lunar New Year. I'm Stacey Abrams, and I'm <i>honored to join the conversation</i>⁺ about the state of our union.</p>
<p>Topos of REALITY</p> <p>REFERENTIAL, PERSPECTIVATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: story-telling, religious language, defining in-group</p>	<p>Growing up, my family went back and forth between lower middle class and working class^{Vr}. Yet, even when they came home weary and bone-tired, my parents <i>found a way to show us all who we could be</i>^{Pr}. My librarian mother taught us to love learning. My father, a shipyard worker, put in overtime and extra shifts, and they made sure we volunteered to help others.^{Pr} Later, they both became united Methodist ministers, an expression of the faith that guides us. These were <i>our family values—faith, service, education, and responsibility</i>⁺.</p>
<p>Topoi of CHALLENGE, (social) JUSTICE</p> <p>REFERENTIAL, PERSPECTIVATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: story-telling, religious language, defining in-group, extending in-group to the nation</p>	<p>Now, we only had one car* so sometimes my dad had hitchhike^{Vr} [...] we eventually found my dad making his way along the road, soaked and shivering in his shirt sleeves. [...] He explained he'd given [his coat] to a homeless man he'd met on the highway [...] [and said] "I knew you were coming for me."^{Pr}</p> <p>Our power and strength as Americans lives in <i>our hard work and our belief</i>⁺ in more. My family understood firsthand that while success is not guaranteed, we live in a nation where opportunity is possible^{Vr}. But we do not succeed alone. [...] In these <i>United States</i>⁺, when times are tough, we can persevere because <i>our friends and neighbors will come for us</i>.</p>
<p>Topoi of (social) JUSTICE, THREAT</p> <p>REFERENTIAL, PERSPECTIVATION strategies</p> <p>Comment: religious language, defining in-group, extending in-group to the nation, shared values</p>	<p>My reason for running for governor [of Georgia] was simple — I love our country⁺ and its promise of opportunity for all⁺, and I stand here tonight because I <i>hold fast to my father's credo</i>⁺. Together we are coming for America, <i>for a better America</i>⁺. [...] I joined volunteers to distribute meals to furloughed federal workers. They waited in line for a box of food and a sliver of hope since they hadn't received a paycheck in weeks^{Vr}. Making livelihoods of our federal workers a pawn for political games <i>is a disgrace</i>. The shutdown was a <u>stunt</u>⁻⁻, engineered by the president of the United States⁻⁻, one that <u>defied every tenet of fairness and abandoned</u> ⁻ not just our people but our values. [...] We may come from different sides of the political aisle*, but our joint commitment to the ideals of <i>this nation</i>⁺ cannot be negotiable.</p>
<p>Topoi of (social) JUSTICE, REALITY, THREAT</p> <p>NOMINATION, PERSPECTIVATION, INTENSIFICATION strategies</p>	<p>In Georgia and around the country, people are striving for a middle class where <u>a salary truly equals economic security</u>^{Pr}. But instead, <i>families' hopes are being crushed by Republican leadership</i>⁻⁻ that ignores real life^{Vr} or just doesn't understand it.</p>
<p>Topoi of (social) JUSTICE, HISTORY</p>	<p>We know bipartisanship could craft a 21st-century immigration plan*, but this administration chooses</p>

<p>NOMINATION, PERSPECTIVATION, INTENSIFICATION strategies</p>	<p><i>to cage children and tear families apart--</i>. <i>Compassionate treatment+</i> at the border is not the same as open borders. President Reagan understood this ^{Pr}. President Obama understood this ^{Pr}. Americans understand this and the Democrats stand ready to effectively secure our ports and borders.</p>
<p>Topoi of BURDEN, URGENCY NOMINATION, PERSPECTIVATION strategies Comment: story-telling, from personal to general</p>	<p>And rather than suing <i>to dismantle--</i> the Affordable Care Act as Republican Attorneys General have, our leaders must protect the progress we've made and <i>commit to expanding health care+</i> and lowering cost for everyone ^{Pr}. My father has battled prostate cancer for years. To help cover the cost, I found myself <i>sinking deeper into debt--</i>, because while you can defer some payments, you can't defer cancer treatment.</p>
<p>Topoi of BURDEN, (social) JUSTICE, THREAT REFERENTIAL, PERSPECTIVATION strategies Comment: inclusive pronouns, in-group alignment</p>	<p>We can do so much more: take action on climate change, defend individual liberties with <i>fair-minded judges++</i>. But none of these ambitions are possible without the bedrock guarantee of our right to vote. ^{Pr} Let's be clear. <i>Voter suppression is real--</i>. From <i>making it harder to register--</i> and stay on the rolls, to moving and closing polling places, to rejecting lawful ballots, we can no longer ignore <i>these threats to democracy--</i>.</p>
<p>Topoi of BURDEN, HISTORY, (social) JUSTICE NOMINATION, REFERENTIAL, PERSPECTIVATION strategies Comment: inclusive pronouns</p>	<p>We fought Jim Crow with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Yet we continue to confront <i>racism--</i> from our past and in our present^{Vr}, which is why <u>we must hold everyone from the highest offices to our own families accountable for racist words and deeds and call racism what it is: wrong.</u>^{Pr}</p>
<p>Topoi of REALITY, (social) JUSTICE REFERENTIAL, PERSPECTIVATION strategies Comment: defining in-group, extending in-group to the nation, religious language, direct address</p>	<p>So even as <i>I am very disappointed--</i> by the president's approach to our problems, I still don't want him to fail ^{Pr}. But we need him to tell the truth^{Vr} and to respect his duties* and respect the extraordinary diversity that defines America. [...] And with a renewed commitment to social and economic justice, we will create a <i>stronger America together</i>. Because America wins by <i>fighting for our shared values+</i> against all enemies, foreign and domestic. That is who we are^{Vr}, and when we do so, never wavering, the state of our union will always be strong. Thank you and may God bless the United States of America.</p>

Table 3

Verbatim excerpts from the 2019 rebuttal speech by Stacey Abrams with added DHA comments and AF emphases.

Discussion. Not really a point-counterpoint rebuttal speech, Abrams' address aims to outline a different vision from a different perspective. Indeed, she had recently lost to her nationally watched campaign to become Georgia's Governor to the Republican Brian Kemp in a race marred by voting rights issues. After her defeat, Abrams further advocated for the voting rights of communities of colour. This convinced many Democrats that she was the best person to respond to Trump's SOTU. Substantially, she chose the themes of

her speech according to the Democratic expectations, such as social justice (which is difficult to achieve because of lingering racism), a faulty criminal justice system, economic inequality, a lack of opportunities, etc. Although her rhetoric utilises typical strategies, the tonality of her speech is very different from the overall sentiment of the presidential SOTU. The story-telling is personal, and the rhetorical move is from the personal to the collective. She believes good communicators have the power to tell stories that change lives: 'Your capacity as communicators is to tell those stories, and to be honest about what it means and why it hurts and why it can be difficult' (Abrams 2019). For example, in her rebuttal, the topos of burden is very different from the Trumpian 'white man's burden', since it consists in the difficult confrontation with the lingering racism in the US ('We fought Jim Crow with the Civil Rights Act...').

The semantics of her religious vocabulary are grounded on genuine faith, as well as the faith in shared values and the emphasis on the need for truthfulness. In terms of appraisal, apart from negative judgements of Trump's and Republicans' social politics and voter suppression, the categories of propriety, veracity and normality emerge.

4.3. Trump's and Abrams' topoi and strategies

As shown in the table below, HISTORY IS the major TOPOS in Trumps' SOTU address, with its emphasis on the glorious history of America and her patriots, and then the CHALLENGE to create new jobs and solve the problems neglected by Obama's administration, while JUSTICE is not foregrounded. Contrarily, JUSTICE is to the fore in Abrams' speech, which highlights the lack of social justice in relation to the above-mentioned issues and the burdening problem of voter suppression. The strategy of Perspectivation is widely used in Abrams' rebuttal. Trump's address relies instead on the Nomination and Referential discursive strategies. Apparently, the overall tonality of the two speeches is quite different, including at a lexical level (e.g., *heroes, patriots, terrific, savage, fastest pace, hope-promise-light* vs. *credo, salary, extraordinary diversity, striving, disappointed, crashed hope*), but some commonality can be found in their direct addresses to their 'fellow Americans'.

TOPOI	TOPOI	Discursive Strategies	Discursive Strategies
Trump	Abrams	Trump	Abrams
HISTORY 7	JUSTICE 7	Nomination 6	Perspectivation 9
CHALLENGE 5	HISTORY 3	Referential 5	Referential 6
NUMBERS 5	BURDEN 3	Perspectivation 4	Nomination 4
BURDEN 4	THREAT 3	Intensification 3	Intensification 2
URGENCY 4	REALITY 3	Argumentation 3	
AUTHORITY 3	CHALLENGE 1		
DEFINITION 2	URGENCY 1		
JUSTICE 2			
REALITY 1			
THREAT 1			

Table 4

Trump's and Abrams' topoi and strategies (developed from Tables 3 and 5).

Discussion. The greater use of Perspectivation in Abrams' rebuttal conveys her effort to outline her different vision of the US societal context from the perspective of the non-privileged groups, whose resilience and capacity are also conveyed. Contrariwise, Trump utilised the Nomination and Referential discursive strategies more often to shape a

recognisable identity for his loyal addressees and build an American in-group identity that contrasted with threatening out-groups.

5. The media’s response

5.1. Fact-checking

Apparently, fact-checking has become a constant feature in the news media coverage of Trump’s presidency. Among many others,¹⁰ the NPR (a non-profit media organisation with the mission to create a more informed public) covered the address with 49 fact checks. Three instantiations are excerpted in the table below and annotated in AF terms (see legend above).

Trump’s SOTU	Fact Checks
Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, the First Lady of the United States (applause), and my fellow Americans. We meet tonight in a moment of unlimited potential as we begin a new Congress. I stand here ready to work with you to achieve historic breakthroughs for all Americans.	Remarkably, President Trump did not acknowledge ^{PrVr} -- the new power dynamic in Washington. The last four presidents have all lost the House during their presidency. The immediate three before Trump—Bill Clinton in 1995, George W. Bush in 2007 and Barack Obama in 2011— <i>all hit gracious notes+</i> at the beginning of their speeches, congratulating the opposition party for its electoral success. <i>Trump did not--</i> . Domenico Montanaro, NPR Political Editor
This year, American astronauts will go back to space on American rockets. (Applause.)	Both SpaceX and Boeing are supposed to fly crewed missions with American astronauts to the International Space Station this year. Currently American astronauts travel to the station aboard Russian rockets. Geoff Brumfiel, NPR Editor, Science Desk
Together, we can break decades of political stalemate. We can bridge old divisions, heal old wounds, build new coalitions, forge new solutions, and unlock the extraordinary promise of America’s future. The decision is ours to make. We must choose between greatness or gridlock, results or resistance, vision or vengeance, incredible progress or pointless destruction.	This language is strikingly similar to what President Trump said on election night 2016, when he said it was “time for America to bind the wounds of division” and “come together as one united people.” Of course, <i>America didn’t come together, and more than two years later--</i> , the president is still <i>reading lines from a teleprompter--</i> about healing those wounds. Tamara Keith, NPR White House Correspondent

Table 5
Examples from fact checks (NPR 2019).

Discussion. In terms of evaluative resources, these political editors predictably use negative appreciation and affect. In the second fact check, there is no explicitly judgmental wording but only ‘factual’ information, which evokes a negative judgement. Furthermore, in the first and third fact checks, an ironic tonality is discernible, but there is no

¹⁰ A comprehensive analysis of the copious fact-checking of the 2019 SOTU address, which had an impressive media coverage (see 5.2), lies well outside the scope of the present analysis. Examples from the NPR fact checks were selected for the purposes of this study, given the independent and (predictably) non-biased nature of the organisation.

categorisation for irony in the AF yet. Interestingly, the boundary between fact and opinion is not a clear-cut affair.

5.2. The media coverage

A comprehensive overview of how the media treated the State of the Union address is provided by Kalev Leetaru (2019), the creator of GDELT (Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone), which is a platform that monitors the world's news media in print, broadcast, and web formats in over 100 languages daily.¹¹ Using data from the GDELT Project, Leetaru examined the global online news coverage mentioning 'SOTU' and 'Trump' from the start of Tuesday, February 5 through to noon on Wednesday, February 6, as summarised in the table below.

Keywords	How much they were mentioned	Leetaru's comments (abridged)
shutdown	Mentioned by 60% of coverage in the hours leading up to the SOTU, dropping to around 45% during the speech and falling to 30% by noon the following day.	The rapid fall in mentions of the shutdown suggests that Trump's speech succeeded in shifting the media narrative toward his administration's priority issues.
bipartisan, cooperation, divisive	20% of the coverage mentioned the word "bipartisan" compared with just 13% in 2018. "Cooperation" was mentioned in 10% of articles, compared with just 2.5% in 2018. "Divisive" appeared in only 3% of the coverage, compared with 5% in 2018.	The president scored "another rare victory" in these percentiles.
economy, jobs	The "economy" and "economic" were about on par with the previous year, accounting for half of the coverage during the speech and around 30% after it. The more specific words "jobs" and "employment" were mentioned in 40% of the coverage during the speech and 30% afterwards. In 2018, they received roughly half as many mentions: 20% and 15%, respectively.	
socialism, Cortez	"Socialism", "socialist" or "socialists" accounted for 15% of coverage, compared with less than 1% in the previous year. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez accounted for a huge 7% of SOTU media coverage in 2019.	Socialism was the big winner this year
Afghanistan, Mueller	"Afghanistan", "Syria" or "Syrian" gained around a quarter of the coverage during the speech and 17% afterwards (accounting for just 15% during and 5% afterwards in the previous year). "Mueller", "investigate" or "investigation" averaged around a quarter of the coverage for 2019 compared with nearly a third in the previous year.	
fact check	"Fact check", "fact checking" or "fact	This suggests that the media may

¹¹ The GDELT dates back to 1979 and makes extensive use of AfricaNews, Agence France Presse, Associated Press, Associated Press Online, Associated Press Worldstream, BBC Monitoring, Christian Science Monitor, Facts on File, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, the New York Times, United Press International and the Washington Post, among other sources.

	checks” averaged around 10% of the coverage during the speech and 7% after. In 2018, the numbers were just 5% and 2.5%, respectively.	be increasingly adopting fact-checking as part of their approach to covering the Trump presidency.
suffragette white, women	Trump’s nod to the record number of women in Congress and the ocean of “suffragette white” in the audience made “women” one of the keywords of the evening, mentioned in 45% of the coverage during the speech and around 20% after it, compared with around 20% overall in 2018.	

Table 6
Keywords from “How Media Treated the State of the Union Address” (abridged from Leetaru 2019).

Discussion. In Leetaru’s words, “Putting this all together, it seems Trump’s State of the Union address was successful, at least momentarily, in pivoting the media conversation from investigations and the shutdown and toward the domestic issues most important to the administration. It remains to be seen for how long.” Apparently, the media reaction to the 2019 SOTU was generally positive, and this is confirmed by the polls conducted immediately after the speech: among others, polls by CBS and CNN both found that 76% of viewers approved of the speech (CBS News 2019; Schwartz 2019). On the other hand, the 2019 Democratic rebuttal by Stacey Abrams was mentioned in around 20% of the coverage, similar to the 2018 rebuttal by Joe Kennedy III, which garnered a similar number (around 15%).

6. Conclusions

In this complex communicative event, the affordances of the contemporary media played a central role in the prolonged efforts to gain the audience’s consensus. Within our polymedia environment, it was (is) possible to watch, listen, read, compare and comment on the two speeches in real time in our multi-layered virtual landscape. Also of interest are the readers’ comments added to the professional journalists’ articles as well as posts on Facebook pages, YouTube comments, tweets, etc., which could be topics of further research. Overall, such comments validated both the journalists’ sense of the 2019 SOTU’s newsworthiness and the audience’s perspective on its noteworthiness. Such polyphony of voices shaped a multi-layered dialogic event, across a plurality of channels/media along a chronologic dimension which encompassed both the (quasi-)simultaneous exchanges and deferred dialogic interventions, in new loci of communicative interactions.

Still, a multimodal discourse analysis of the videos of this modern televised pageant would also yield results. Yet the necessary ‘analytical heuristics’ led to the domain of the present investigation being limited due to space constraints and specific foci.

According to our data, the effectiveness of Trump’s 2019 SOTU address lies not so much in rhetoric, but in the contextual relevance of the foregrounded notions. Indeed, his oratory is in line with the mentioned evolution of presidential addresses (shorter sentences, inclusive pronouns, ‘God’, etc.) and with the TOPOI indicated in the DHA. Yet his emphasis on ‘bipartisan’ cooperation and, above all, on the progress made by women in the US workforce and politics prompted a standing ovation from the entire chamber.

Trump directly addressed the women in the audience, who wore 'suffragette white' as a reproach of his controversial attitudes, and took their irony jocularly while mentioning the record number of women serving in Congress. Here the dialogic exchange unfolded multimodally, verbal information and joking vs colour-based symbolism.

The president was negotiating for a general consensus by emphasising the economic success of his administration and the progress made in science and technology, while on the other hand discrediting Obamacare and pushing his own agenda on immigration – an issue where scare tactics explicitly prevail. Trump also defended his politics to end the participation of the US in “endless wars” (in Syria and Afghanistan).

As both the frequent applause during the speech and the GELDT data, reinforced by the real-time polls, indicate, the 2019 SOTU address was a successful communicative event, shaping a persuasive image of US successes and an even brighter future, thanks to Trump's discursive emphasis on the capacity and tenacity of his administration and of the civil heroes and patriots he mentioned with reference to past and present history. Trump's SOTU was successful in turning the media narrative from the shutdown towards other domestic issues, though oratorical success does not necessarily lead to enduring political success.

As regards the rebuttal speech, the numerous fact-checkers in fact rebutted Trump's speech more punctually (and ironically) than that of Stacey Abrams. Although the choice of Abrams for the Democratic response was generally appreciated, predictably also for her identity as a successful African American woman, grounded in social, religious and ethical shared values, her speech did not galvanise the press.

Yet, her focus on voter suppression was and is relevant to the exercise of participative democracy, and she laid a major emphasis on the need for the (re-)empowerment of the marginalised groups. Abrams's dialogic response, rather than a point-counter point rebuttal of Trump's assertions and assertiveness, painted a different picture of US realities, reconsidering the present State of the Union from the perspective of the less affluent, the poor and the still racialised.

In 2019, the activist group Black Voters Matter (founded by LaTosha Brown and Cliff Albright in 2016) promoted an extraordinary voter outreach initiative to organise Black voters ahead of the November election by driving across frontline states in “the blackest bus in America.” Their purpose was to renovate/build Black voters' trust in democracy, overcoming the widespread mistrust of the system and in their own power to make a difference by voting, which, by and large, originated from Republican voter suppression, Democratic inattention, and the lack of expected improvements during Obama's presidency.¹² To some extent, even if Abrams' compelling vision did not polarise the mediascape, yet the *noteworthiness*, and *interestingness* of her rebuttal speech helped to convey the impact of her dialogical response in grassroots politics.

From the overarching pragmatic perspective, we could define the SOTU address and the Democratic rebuttal speech as a relevant dialogic event, where Abrams' heteroglossic speech expressed alternative visions in response to Trump's more monoglossic address, and the media significantly contributed to the polyphony of voices.

¹² Charlotte Alter (2020) How Black Political Organizers Shored Up the Democratic Base. <https://time.com/5889888/black-voters-michigan/>. Apparently, their initiative contributed to the results of the 2020 presidential election.

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