

When Celebrity Meets Presidency: Donald Trump's Rhetorical Toolbox

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Abstract

President Donald Trump deviates from traditional presidential rhetoric and forms his own rhetorical strategy. Focusing on his usage of rhetoric, in this study, I explore the research question: What rhetorical strategies are consistently used by Trump and how does it form a cohesive rhetorical toolbox? Reviewing extant literature points to connections among Trump's rhetoric, the influence of celebrity, and phenomena explained by dramaturgical theory and Personal Branding Theory. From there, decades of his rhetoric, dating back to his time as a real estate agent and reality television star through his second term in the Oval Office, were identified and labeled. It was concluded that Trump's "rhetorical toolbox" primarily consists of figurative language, catchphrases, small stories, and object language. Recognizing the design in Trump's rhetorical strategy sets up a framework for a better understanding of how the shifting political landscapes of today have unsettled traditional presidential rhetoric.

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When Celebrity Meets Presidency: Donald Trump's Rhetorical Toolbox

Donald Trump is the second United States president to serve two non-consecutive terms, with the first being Grover Cleveland in 1893, nearly 132 years before Trump's reelection (Bushong, 2019). The first president in modern history to win the presidency again after losing his first reelection campaign and the only president to be convicted of felony charges and impeached twice, all before his second term, Donald Trump has lived a public life shaped by controversy (Biography, 2021). Reality star turned president, he strays from the usual traditions and standards of the presidency and is influenced by his celebrity. His bold personality and socialite past have given him an atypical presence in American political life.

This study aims to delineate and analyze President Trump's rhetorical tools to form a cohesive strategy. Much like a salesman relying on the items inside his briefcase during a pitch, Trump has his own toolbox filled with rhetorical strategies that define his communication patterns. The president's rhetorical toolbox is unconventional, and he heavily relies on it in the public sphere in order to bolster his own power and reputation. Defined by four distinct types of tools, Donald Trump's rhetoric depends on figurative language, object language, small stories, and catchphrases.

Literature Review

Presidential Rhetoric

The role of the President of the United States is one that is formed by those who have come before the current Commander-in-Chief. Incumbents shape the position, causing presidential rhetoric to be able to be defined by the similarities between each of these leaders and how they communicate. The overall institution of the presidency ends up sitting on the shoulders of one man, who is walking next to the footprints left behind by those who previously held the

title (Jamieson & Campbell, 2017). While presidential rhetoric is defined by the historical patterns of the presidency, one must also examine the consequences of such rhetoric, which has become increasingly prominent during recent presidencies. Presidential speech has become a form of governing rather than just relaying information. When a president gives a speech, it demands public reaction in the same way an actual event occurring would. In *The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency*, scholars cite President John Kennedy consistently bringing up that America was facing a national crisis while often being unable to articulate what the crisis was or what next steps were needed in order to solve it (Ceaser et al., 1981).

Scholar David Zarefsky adds to the notion that speech is governing, saying that presidential rhetoric “defines political reality.” What the president says or does inevitably shapes public perception of the political landscape, as it is both a reflection of how the president perceives the world and the values he holds, but also the ways he can change public opinion and attitudes. The president's perceived reality becomes America's reality (Zarefsky, 2004). Overall, the discipline of presidential rhetoric determines the president's ability to persuade the public and maintain or lose power. Power which ensures that the executive branch has the ability to control society in a way other governmental officials and political figures lack (Otto, 1986). However, Donald Trump, although the President, does not fit historical conventions of presidential rhetoric in part because of his decades-long public presence outside the realm of governance.

Celebrity and Performance

Straying from traditional political rhetoric and that of previous United States presidents, Trump has maintained the role of celebrity. Rather than mimicking the persona of a celebrity, as other politicians have done, Trump, in and of himself, is one. Starting as a New York City real estate mogul, he then went on to star in his own hit reality shows: “The Apprentice” and “The

Celebrity Apprentice.” Although always a large personality, transitioning from businessman to television star fully allowed Donald Trump to embrace operating as a brand.

The president depends on the allure and charm of celebrity culture to shape his public persona rather than the professionalism that has been linked to the office of the president (King, 2018). To ignore his background would be to ignore what has shaped his speech and communication. Trump's past as a reality television star and prominent New York businessman influenced his rhetoric, leading to more informal and simplistic speech patterns needed to maintain his persona (Ross & Rivers, 2020). It has also shaped the way he performs in public as president.

Dramaturgy, a theory significantly formed by Erving Goffman, compares each interaction to a performance put on by an individual. Goffman breaks Dramaturgy into three parts: playing roles, managing impressions, and navigating different stages. Time, place, and audience all impact one's social interaction or “performance” (McLeod, 2025). Trump is known for this art of performance, as his forward-facing presidential persona is often not the one individuals interact with in private. Goffman describes this phenomenon by comparing it to when a performer is backstage. There, they will act out of character and different from when they step on stage to perform and take on a persona. “Since the vital secrets of a show are visible backstage and since performers behave out of character while there, it is natural to expect that the passage from the front region to the back region will be kept closed to members of the audience or that the entire back region will be kept hidden from them,” says Goffman. He goes on to label this as Impression Management and cites that one must have a place to “turn off” the persona they have been presenting throughout the day.

“If a factory worker is to succeed in giving the appearance of working hard all day, then he must have a safe place to hide the jig that enables him to turn out a day's work with less than a full day's effort," says Goffman (Goffman, 1959, pp. 113–114). Managing impressions is a critical part of an individual's rhetorical method, specifically that of a forward-facing person such as Trump. His celebrity has made him a brand. The name “Trump” is representative of an identity brand that shapes the president's public portrayal of himself and the language he uses.

Personal Branding

Tom Peters, a longtime thought leader in the business realm, is cited as creating the basis for what is now known as Personal Branding Theory, which can be applied to how Donald Trump has turned his identity into a brand, something to market and sell. Peters explains that every individual is the CEO of their own company and must market themselves as such. There is personal responsibility in deciding how one wants to brand themselves and be perceived by the world. Essential to the creation and promotion of “the brand called you” is a message and a strategy. Peters agrees that while substance matters, forming your brand style is equally important. (Peters, 1997).

A distinct personal style can be attributed to Trump, associated with him throughout his personal life and following him into the White House. Since taking office for his second term, Trump has embellished the White House with Gold accents, an essential part of the Trump brand that can be seen in his casinos, hotels, Mar-a-Lago club, and more. When asked in a 1990 *Playboy* interview what all the glitz and glam meant to him, Trump responded, “props for the show.” When pushed to elaborate, “The show is ‘Trump,’” he replied. “And it is sold-out performances everywhere” (Plaskin, 1990). Here, he also displays a self-awareness surrounding the value and marketing of his own name, a trait that is critical to creating a personal brand.

Personal Branding, although a relatively up-and-coming area of scholarly study, is not a new concept, as humans have been branding themselves since the beginning of time through the collection and presentation of their strengths, values, personality, skills, etc. Authenticity is considered a vital part of this brand as it is what consumers demand (Scheidt & Henseler, 2018).

Trump is no stranger to this, as his time in the limelight has shown him the importance of representing oneself in a way one would a company while also staying true to oneself. His celebrity comes into play here as he has maintained the same language patterns of informality that he used while taking part in Playboy interviews and hosting reality television shows. He is a man who understands the importance of branding himself, with little distinction between the name "Trump" plastered on golden hotels and casinos and the man Trump, standing in the Oval Office.

Rhetorical Strategy

To maintain the brand of "Trump," the president must rely on a rhetorical strategy. Rhetoric is frequently viewed as the art of persuasion and can be utilized through both verbal and written communication. It is a term that encompasses a plethora of methods and tools that tend to have the same common goal; influencing an audience. Although usually associated with lawyers, writers, politicians, and other careers that require persuasion, rhetoric is a tool with useful everyday applications such as in public speaking, marketing, and one-on-one conversation (Mazzei, 2024). While people inadvertently rely on rhetorical tools daily, there is also the deliberate use of such devices to meet one's communication goals.

A rhetorician, as viewed by Aristotle, is an individual who can see what is persuasive in any given situation. For a president, this may include campaign speeches, the State of the Union, Press Briefings, etc. Each covering a different subject matter on different stages, requiring a new

understanding of who your audience is at that moment, what language will be persuasive, and how to accurately convey your messaging. The speaker must know where their audience stands before employing any rhetorical strategy (Rapp, 2022). For Trump, this would be an integral part of maintaining his brand, especially as his audience is generally the American people, a vast and diverse group with varying levels of support and a wide range of attitudes surrounding the president.

While traditional presidential rhetoric has been defined, Trump's continuous distancing of himself from a historically conventional presidency has reshaped what presidential rhetoric is in America's era of Trumpian politics and governance. Due to Trump's unconventional take on what the executive branch is, its roles, and its standard practices, this study explores what Trump's unique rhetorical toolbox is.

Method

Research Design

This study is a qualitative analysis of the rhetorical tools employed by President Donald Trump. These strategies were broken up into four distinct rhetorical categories. The study aims to recognize and assign meaning to the rhetorical patterns consistently used by the president in order to formally develop his rhetorical toolbox.

Data Collection

Quotes and conversations from interviews and other public appearances from Donald Trump, from the 1980s to the present, were collected using RollCall as a starting point, before finding the original medium of the quotes when available. Upwards of 80 different interviews, OpEds, conversations, and speeches were then analyzed to find patterns in rhetorical tools

consistently deployed by the rhetor. Literature and research on these tools were collected in order to better apply them to the analysis of Donald Trump's messaging.

Coding Framework

These patterns were then separated into the following categories: figurative speech, small stories, object language, and catchphrases. Within these categories, patterns were found in the president's utilization of them. The first being Trump's dependence on figurative speech, which used four tools: anacoluthon, bdelygmia, hyperbole, and meiosis. Then there were small stories that used an enthymemic format and object language, reliant on physical appearance and personal branding. And lastly, catchphrases used by the president depended on slogans and repetition. Understanding and labeling the specifics of his most used rhetorical tools allows for an in-depth analysis of Trump's overall rhetorical performance and strategy.

Results

The Art of the Salesman

Throughout his public interactions, Trump operates in a way that is almost representative of a character. There is the man Trump, and then there is the president; the man who gives speeches, spends time berating others on social media, and criticizes the press from the Oval Office. Donald Trump's rhetorical toolbox exists within the function of dramaturgy as many who have private conversations with him highlight the stark contrast to the man Americans watch on the evening news.

After a personal dinner in April of 2025, Comedian Bill Maher, who often criticizes Trump and gets insults slung back his way by the president, went on his show to recount the evening. "The guy I met is not the person who the night before dinner shit-tweeted a bunch of nasty crap about how he thought this dinner was a bad idea and what a deranged asshole I was,"

said Maher at the start of his segment. During his 13-minute reflection on the meal, Maher's main focus was on the stark differences he observed in Trump's public and private personas. "A crazy person doesn't live in the White House. A person who plays a crazy person on TV a lot lives there," said Maher. He reveled in the fact that the president laughed at his jokes, was able to poke fun at himself, and acted with graciousness when the evening prior, he was standing at a podium berating someone, a completely persona from the one presented during a private evening at the White House (Real Time with Bill Maher, 2025).

Maher is not the only person to note these differences in their public versus private interactions with Trump. In her memoir *107 Days*, Vice President and 2024 presidential candidate Kamala Harris recounts a phone call with Trump after an assassination plot against him had been revealed. "I'd readied myself for a phone conversation with Mr. Hyde, but Dr. Jekyll had picked up the call," she reflected (Harris, 2025, pp. 173–174). Notably, Harris is referencing Jekyll and Hyde, characters from an 1886 book, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where Jekyll is a moral member of society who transforms into the evil Hyde (BBC, n.d.).

Harris then goes on to claim that over the phone, she was met with respect from Trump, who publicly belittled her intelligence, personality, and consistently mispronounced her name. "You are a tough, smart customer, and I say that with great respect," Harris claims Trump said. "And you also have a beautiful name. I got used to that name, it's Kamala" (Harris, 2025, pp. 173–174). These revelations and this conversation did not stop him from his continuous public attacks and mispronunciation of her name. His extreme switches and revisions in his rhetorical performances are where his presidential rhetoric comes into play. In private, he has mastered the art of being viewed as respectful and measured, and in public, he has mastered the art of the salesman. Basing the understanding of Donald Trump's rhetorical toolbox through the lens of

performance allows for a deeper analysis of his strategies. It develops the notion that his rhetorical method, regardless of how unorthodox it may be, is to some extent calculated, as seen in his ability to switch from one personality to the next, depending on audience, location, and the way he wants to be perceived in that moment.

Figurative Language

The first part of Trump's rhetorical method is the way he utilizes figurative language; which is the use of language that extends past the literal meaning of words and phrases. He consistently uses this in order to persuade his audience and convey his messaging. Through the analysis of four decades of public statements, four forms of figurative language were regularly favored by Trump; the first of which is anacoluthon.

Anacoluthon

In an October 2024 appearance on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, Trump self-identifies one of his rhetorical strategies as “the weave,” a format of messaging where he will jump between topics before ending with what he originally started with. He may go from point A to points M, Z, and E, before returning to A. The president claims that one must be deeply intelligent to utilize this strategy and that while everyone may not understand it, “it comes back home for the right people.” “... And my speeches last a long time because of the weave, I mean I weave stories it, and if you don't, if you just read a teleprompter, nobody's going to be very excited. You got to weave it out,” said Trump. “...But the weave is very, very important. Very few weavers around,” (PowerfulJRE, 2024).

Rather than its self-proclaimed title, “the weave” resembles an established rhetorical device known as anacoluthon. This literary device is when a sentence does not follow a grammatical flow and instead winds and abandons structure (Merriam Webster, n.d.). This tool

can be used to emphasize a certain notion, set a tone, or mimic natural speech and is consistently used by Trump. He has used anacoluthon as a thought map, including many ideas in a few sentences. This was seen in his 2026 State of the Union Address, where he was often caught wandering throughout statements, opposed to staying on a grammatically correct track. The address is the longest in modern history, lasting around one hour and 48 minutes, thus highlighting Trump's earlier statement that his speeches are long because of "the weave." (Berger, 2026).

One example of anacoluthon in his State of the Union was when the president began discussing his implementation of tariffs. "So despite the disappointing ruling, these powerful, country-saving — it's saving our country, the kind of money we're taking in — peace protecting — many of the wars I settled was because of the threat of tariffs," said Trump. "I wouldn't have been able to settle them without — will remain in place under fully approved and tested alternative legal statutes, and they've been tested for a long time." Here, he breaks in the middle of the sentence to add a new thought, the money being taken in from other countries, and then goes on to break from traditional structure again when mentioning how the tariffs have ended wars. He wove through ideas while completely breaking the structure of the original sentence (The New York Times, 2026). This rhetorical strategy is not new to Trump, nor is it mutually exclusive to his presidential rhetoric. Trump can be heard using this strategy throughout his time in the limelight, with an instance of him using anacoluthon occurring during a 1998 interview with Chris Matthews on NBC.

"Well, I think, he probably couldn't do any worse. I don't think he could do worse," Trump said when discussing Bill Clinton's scandal. "I think his lawyers, and in particular -- the lawyer wh -- I won't even mention names, but representing him with respect to Paula Jones, I

thought did a terrible job” (NBC News, 2016). Here, he breaks away from his initial comments about the lawyer to insert that he won't name names. It deviates from a clear structure and completely abandons conventional grammar. Trump does this so he can fit all his thoughts into one statement, to share his ideas in a stream of consciousness fashion, and make his attitude surrounding the situation clear.

Anacoluthon is similar to “the weave,” but not identical. Trump's definition of “the weave,” is to move in and out of ideas. While this can be a defining mark of anacoluthon, its main function is the setting aside of grammatical structure, wandering away from it within your sentence or phrase. Ignoring grammatical sentence structure to insert personal thoughts and set the conversational tone is a keystone of Donald Trump's rhetorical strategy, but it is not alone. Anacoluthon is paired with other literary devices to strengthen his rhetorical toolbox.

Bdelygmia

Another piece of figurative language commonly used by Trump is bdelygmia, which is when a rhetorician uses insults or abusive language to portray their vitriol (MacDonald, 2017). Trump uses bdelygmia to put down someone he views as an opponent or bolster his own image and gain power. Pre-presidency, it was frequently the latter. In a 1989 televised interview with CNN's Larry King, Trump begins the interaction by sitting down and insulting King. "Do you mind if I sit back a little bit — because your breath is very bad, it really is. Has this ever been told you before?" Trump said. King took it in good faith and joked, “That's how you get the edge” (Holt, 2016). And while King's statement was said in jest, there is some truth to it. By insulting the person who would be interviewing him, Trump gave himself a bit of an upper hand by shifting the power dynamics.

Women often face the brunt of these insults. In a 1994 interview, after being asked about writer Marie Brenner, who quoted Trump as saying he treated women poorly, Trump responded by saying, "I didn't say that. The woman's a liar, extremely unattractive, lots of problems because of her looks" (Trump, 1994). He also has a history of calling women nasty. During a 2023 CNN Town Hall hosted by journalist Kaitlan Collins, he told her, "You are a nasty person, I'll tell you," when she pushed him on his taking of classified documents (The Telegraph, 2023). Throughout her years of covering the Trump administration, Collins has been subjected to the president calling her nasty more than once. In a December 2025 Truth Social post, the president wrote, "Caitlin Collin's of Fake News CNN, always Stupid and Nasty..." (Trump, 2025). Just two months later, he sparred with Collins again when she questioned him about the Jeffrey Epstein files. "She's a young woman — I don't think I've ever seen you smile," said Trump. "You know why you're not smiling? Because you know you're not telling the truth." "You are so bad," he said during that same news conference. "You know, you are the worst reporter. No wonder CNN has no ratings because of people like you" (Grynbaum, 2026).

Trump's relationship with Collins acts as a case study for his use of *bdelygmia*. Collins is a well-known and established CNN reporter, and Trump's constant criticisms of her act as a way to invalidate her credibility while bolstering his own authority. Slinging insults is a critical part of Donald Trump's rhetorical strategy because of its ability to act as a shield to his power while bringing down those he may view as a threat. However, his relationship with Collins isn't the only time he has taken issue with the press.

Hyperbole

Another rhetorical device favored by the president is hyperbole, exaggeration for effect (Passarello, 2019). His reliance on this device dates back well into his time as a forward-facing

individual. In a 1990 interview with Barbara Walters, Trump said, "I've never seen anything like it. Whether it's a marriage, by the way, or whether it's financial, I've never seen press reporting as I have with regard to me" (Trump, 1990). Here, Trump deploys hyperbole in order to emphasize the way he believes the media is treating him unfairly and painting him in a negative light. In the interview with Walters, he uses this to emphasise his alleged mistreatment, insinuating that the press, as far as he can see, has never been so unfair to anybody as it has to him. Hyperbole is a tool Trump relies on often in order to inflate his own accomplishments or to overstate the shortcomings of others, such as faulting the press for unfair or bad reporting when it does not favor him.

During his presidencies, his use of hyperbole is regularly meant to make it appear as if his successes are greater than they are in actuality or to suggest that they have never been done before. Whether it's saying the American military is unsurpassed and that "there's never been anything like it" or discussing his economic policies by saying "But now, after just one year of my policies, we are witnessing the exact opposite, virtually no inflation and extraordinarily high economic growth -- growth like I believe you will see very shortly, our country has never seen before, perhaps no country has ever seen before," Trump is consistently inflating his perceived triumphs by isolating them into something that has not occurred previously (Trump, 2026a, 2026b). Similarly to saying something has never been seen before, he also uses hyperbole to say something has never been done before.

During a 2017 political rally, he used this strategy to highlight his military accomplishments, saying, "We're rebuilding the military at a level to which it's never been before, we're rebuilding" (Trump, 2017). The hyperbolic term has followed him into his second term, touting frequent use. During the 2026 White House Easter Egg Roll, he said, "Our country

is doing so well, like it has never done before.” He then went on to continue his use of hyperbole by claiming, “We've broken every record on the stock market. We've broken every record in our military” (Trump, 2026c). And while hyperbole is a tried and true Trump rhetorical strategy, he also loves a good 180, doing the opposite of hyperbole and instead making things seem more insignificant than they are.

Meiosis

Exaggeration is something the president does well, but so is understatement. Meiosis, as a literary device, is when the rhetorician understates something to minimize its significance (Salao, 2023). During his first run for president, a 2005 Access Hollywood recording was leaked of Trump, where he makes remarks about women, saying, “I moved on her like a bitch,” “I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything,” and “Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything” (The New York Times, 2016). Although these statements certainly are not understated, Trump's response to them being leaked is.

During a 2016 debate, Anderson Cooper gave Trump the space to take accountability or give an explanation by saying, “You called what you said locker room banter. You described kissing women without consent, grabbing their genitals. That is sexual assault. You brag that you have sexually assaulted women. Do you understand that?” Trump doubled down by once again giving it the label of locker-room talk. “Certainly I'm not proud of it,” said Trump. “But this is locker room talk” (NBC News, 2016b). Here, Trump has taken something he said, something that caused outrage due to its callousness, and minimized it to just locker room talk, making the situation seem insignificant in order to improve the way he is publicly perceived.

Another example of this tactic being used by Trump is the way he has described the war in Iran. Beginning on February 28th of 2026 and remaining on going as of April of 2026, Donald Trump waged war on Iran, launching joint strikes with Israel. Iranian civilians, U.S. service members, and more have been killed as a result (Ahn, 2026). To make the situation more insignificant than it may be, the president has called it “a short-term excursion,” a utilization of meiosis (Martinez, 2026). This tool is especially beneficial to him in scenarios where he may be facing criticism, as seen with the Access Hollywood tape and the military deployment in Iran, as 61% of Americans are not in favor of Trump's handling of the situation, 41% believe it will make America less safe, and 45% say the military involvement is not going well (Nadeem, 2026). By lessening the importance of something through his use of language Trump, once again, gives himself the upper hand and attempts to regain a positive reputation and public reception.

Catchphrases

The implementation of figurative language devices of meiosis, anacoluthon, bdelegmia, and hyperbole is a critical part of Trump's rhetorical toolbox, but they do not act alone. The next part of Trump's rhetorical toolbox is the use of catchphrases. Catchphrases are an effective rhetorical tool as the repetition makes them memorable and they can create a sense of unity while also serving the function of branding (Lynn et al., 2022). Some of Trump's notable use of catchphrases are the statements “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), “Swamp the Vote,” “Never surrender,” and “Drill, baby drill” (Kincade, 2024).

Used since his first campaign, Trump has coined the term Make America Great Again, also known as MAGA. Although originally used in the 1980 Ronald Reagan and George W Bush campaign, it was Trump who trademarked the phrase (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.). Put on t-shirts, hats, campaign signs, flags, and more. MAGA has become the cornerstone and rallying

cry of Trump's political life. He claimed to have no previous knowledge of the term's use and instead picked it to appeal to voters who were unhappy with the way Obama had been running the country. Since its trademark in 2015, the catchphrase has gone on to unify his base and brand his campaigns and time in the White House (Sheposh, 2016). The catchphrases "Swamp the vote," "Never surrender," and "Drill, baby drill" are a few of the catchphrases aside from MAGA that Trump has repeatedly used, most of which in his 2024 reelection campaign.

"Drill, baby drill" is meant to represent a specific campaign promise as it was first used in 2008 by Republican candidate Sarah Palin to emphasize her desire to expand domestic fracking, Trump has taken it on as his own. His use of the term dates back to 2022 but became a large part of his 2024 campaign and his presidency, as he quoted it during his 2026 State of the Union, saying "American natural gas production is at an all-time high because I kept my promise to drill, baby, drill" (Kincade, 2024; The New York Times, 2026). While this catchphrase was used as a tool to push a specific policy, he also uses catchphrases to gain election support, which is where "Swamp the vote" and "Never surrender" come into play. "Swamp the vote" is used to encourage his supporters to vote, especially after Trump pushed the narrative that the 2020 election was rigged against him. Within a similar realm, "Never surrender" is a reference to the legal troubles he has found himself in. The catchphrase is a promise to come out victorious and paints him as a strong leader (Kincade, 2024).

Another favored phrase by the president is "fight, fight, fight," which first came to be after he emerged, fist raised in the air, blood coming from his ear, chanting the phrase after an assassination attempt at a 2024 political rally in Butler, Pennsylvania (FOX 5 New York, 2024). He has continued to use this phrase as a rallying cry for his supporters and a show of his strength and leadership. As recently as April 2026, he had posted an image on Truth Social portraying

him with a raised fist and gold embossed bold letters, spelling out "Fight, Fight, Fight" to promote a gala at Mar-a-Lago (Trump, 2026). Overall, Trump's use of catchphrases is an effective use of rhetoric and repetition, resulting in the union of his base, and it has steadily remained one of his largest rhetorical tools.

Small Stories

Small stories are the next component of Trump's rhetorical toolbox, working together with figurative language and catchphrases to construct his broader strategy. A small story is used socially, is typically short, timely, and intended to present the audience with a change (Ives & Juzwik, 2015). Dr. Alexandra Georgakopoulou, a key developer of the small stories framework, explains that features of small stories are that the stories can lack full development, resulting in difficulty to confirm the information given (personal communication, April 15th, 2026). When giving a small story, the rhetor is performing a version of self to their listeners, forming an identity. There are three levels to small stories: characters being performed, the rhetorician's performance of self within the orbit of the characters, and the speaker's overall narrative (Ives & Juzwik, 2015). Trump often uses the art of the short story to do just that; perform a self to his audience in a way that would end up beneficial to him.

An example of this is the framing he uses when discussing immigration. During a 2015 press conference for his presidential campaign, Trump said, "They got some rough, illegal immigrants in those gangs. They're getting out. You mind if I send them out? Now, if they come from Mexico, do you mind if I send them back to Mexico?" (Trump, 2015). In this small story, Trump's audience is the voters whom he is trying to gain the support of. Because of this, he needs to articulate his policy goals and position himself to be perceived positively. To do that, he establishes undocumented immigrants as the villains who are coming into the country and

joining gangs. He then positions himself as the hero for sending them back to their country of origin while continuing the narrative that America has an immigration problem. This is a narrative flow he often follows when talking about immigrants, calling them “not human,” “rough people,” and saying that they poison the blood of America and then announcing his plans or achievements for ridding the country of them (Terkel & Lebowitz, 2024).

Repeatedly, Trump uses the small story to demonize a group he views as “other.” Much like with immigration, he uses this tactic when referring to issues surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. In a 2024 campaign video posted by Trump on Instagram, the ad says, “Kamala supports taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners and illegal aliens. Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you” (Trump, 2024). Here, Trump creates a narrative by introducing a perceived problem, gender-affirming surgery for undocumented and incarcerated individuals, and a clear solution; vote for Trump. He paints himself the hero again while he creates antagonists: his political opponent, immigrants, prisoners, and transgender people.

Enthymeme

Trump's small stories consistently use an enthymemic structure, as seen in the examples above, like the Kamala Harris ad. This sentence format is when two claims are made as an argument, and it is assumed that the audience will come to the proper conclusion. With the Harris ad, he sets up the idea that he is for the American people, and Harris is not because of her support of gender affirming care for undocumented people and incarcerated individuals. The conclusion for the audience to draw is that those groups, undocumented immigrants, prisoners, and gender-nonconforming people, are “less” American than others, and protecting them is harming those Trump views as true Americans.

Another example is when Trump said, "They got some rough, illegal immigrants in those gangs. They're getting out. You mind if I send them out? Now, if they come from Mexico, do you mind if I send them back to Mexico?" only two arguments were explicitly stated. Illegal immigrants are in gangs, and Trump is going to send them to Mexico. The implied argument is that Trump keeps America safe from dangerous immigrants and should be president. Audience and location are especially important in this scenario, as the location is a campaign press conference and the audience is generally Trump supporters, leading to voting for Trump being the natural conclusion.

Enthymeme was also used in his campaign ad discussing gender-affirming care and immigration. When the ad says, "Kamala supports taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners and illegal aliens. Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you," it expects the consumer to piece together the official messaging. Kamala Harris is pro-taxpayers taking care of gender-affirming care for "bad" people (undocumented immigrants and prisoners). Donald Trump is for the American people. Therefore, Kamala Harris is not good for the American public, and Donald Trump is. Overall, Trump uses enthymemes in small stories as a persuasive strategy in his rhetorical toolbox.

Object Language

The final part of Trump's strategy is the implementation of object language. Here, he relies on his hair and clothing to create a personal brand (Bei-bei, 2017). This is especially effective because both have remained heavily unchanged throughout his entire time as a public figure. Donald Trump consistently wears oversized suits, oftentimes labeled by the public as "ill-fitting." The baggy style is reminiscent of the 80s fashion staples, which is notably the same time Trump was rising to fame (Paul, 2017). Both the jackets and pants of these suits are

consistently noticeably oversized and not tailored to the president. These suits are then always paired with a tie that is longer than the average length, falling below his belt (Morrison, 2020). Once he entered the political world, MAGA hats became a large part of his wardrobe as well. Maintaining a steady style, especially one that is unconventional in both modern times and within the political world, allows Trump to create a distinct personal brand.

He does this with his hairstyle as well. His striking comb-over has been the topic of conversation for decades, with countless questions over its authenticity and comments on the overall styling. Trump himself has fed into the publicity over his locks, often joking in interviews about the rumours over its fairness. "But this has been a great day. We have perfect weather, beautiful, not too warm, not too cold, a little breeze to mess up my hair," said Trump in a 2007 interview with Don Lemon. "People at least see my hair is real," he joked. "...Everyone is saying it's real. They can't even believe it" (Trump, 2007). He understands the way his hair has helped curate a personal brand for him. In a 2004 interview with *Playboy*, Trump brings up Melania, his now wife, cutting his hair. While she cuts it, "She doesn't fool with the hair," said Trump. "She's not trying to reinvent the wheel" (Trump, 2004). Through his classic oversized suit and tie outfits paired with his signature comb-over, Trump is creating an image for his personal brand. This acts as a rhetorical tool as it gives him distinction, identity, and power over the way he is perceived.

Discussion

Cohesion of Rhetorical Tools

Donald Trump's four main rhetorical strategies of figurative language, catchphrases, small stories, and object language all work together to form a cohesive rhetorical toolbox. He frequently uses two or more of these strategies at once, like with his catchphrase Make America

Great Again. It is utilizing catchphrases as a tool, but also enthymemes from small stories, as it is saying America was great and needs to be great again. The implication? America is not currently great. Object language can also be applied here due to the phrase MAGA appearing on his merch and the hats the president consistently sports.

Another instance of this rhetorical overlap can be seen in his interview with Barbara Walters. When he says, "I've never seen anything like it. Whether it's a marriage, by the way, or whether it's financial, I've never seen press reporting as I have with regard to me," he is using the figurative language literary device of hyperbole but he is also once again using the small story (Trump, 1990). Trump created a narrative of an unfair press and created characters by making the press, and subsequently Walters, the antagonist. He then inserts himself as a character in the narrative by portraying himself as the victim of the media. A broader and more recent version of this is his overlapping of catchphrases and the figurative language tool hyperbole. Trump's constant use of the phrasing "never been done before" and "never seen before" acts as a form of a catchphrase due to its overwhelming repetition by the president, on top of acting as a hyperbole. There is a large overlap between all of these tools, as well as effective usage of them together, resulting in a rhetorical method that works for the president.

Trump's Rhetorical Method and Personal Branding

Trump's use of a set rhetorical method feeds into his development of a personal brand, as it is an overall strategy that is unique to him. His naming of "the weave" is a prime example of this, as he is taking a part of his rhetorical method and not only giving a name to it but proudly owning it and discussing it as something beneficial to him as a rhetor. Another way he creates a personal brand through the use of his rhetorical method is through his use of catchphrases, as his most used catchphrase, Make America Great Again, has literally become his brand. He sells

MAGA-branded tea towels, articles of clothing, dishware, jewelry, hats, pickleball paddles, and more (Trump Store, 2019). He has turned his catchphrases into his campaign marketing and something that is profitable while also uniquely tied to him.

Object language is also a large factor in Trump using a rhetorical device as a way to create a personal brand. Having a style that rarely changes, with time or position, goes back to Peters' notion that one must market oneself and be the CEO of one's own company. Maintaining a "look" is marketable, and Trump has shown that through how identifiable his style is and the conversation it has drummed up. Combining his catchphrase with this by consistently wearing his own MAGA merch only furthers this, as he creates a distinct identity through figurative language and object language, supported by his other rhetorical tools.

Trump's Rhetorical Method and Dramaturgy

Goffman's theory is reflected in a lot of how Trump communicates. The examples of Harris and Maher discussing their private interactions with Trump versus his public deployment of bdelymia against them is an excellent representation of this. His "backstage" persona is vastly different from that of the one the audience gets to see. He is attempting to control how he is perceived while altering his persona based on audience and place. Trump is the master of Impression Management.

This shows up through his use of small stories, as he controls where he is placed in the narrative and how he is viewed. Whereas the example of persona is the direct performance of dramaturgy, small story is the influence of it on a rhetorical level. All three parts of Dramaturgy are happening in small story: playing roles, managing impressions, and navigating different stages. Small story allows Trump to alter how he is viewed and place himself within a narrative the way he would like. He picks the role he plays in the story being told, which in part manages

the impression. This is because he is in control of the narrative. If he wants an audience to think he is a strong leader, all he has to do is place himself as a character in the narrative who is what he aims to be seen as. This rhetorical tool then leaves room to navigate different stages as Trump can, and has, altered stories based on who his audience is, still controlling the impression others get by deciding what the proper portrayal of himself in each story is.

Conclusion

Overall, Donald Trump has curated a steady rhetorical toolbox that he consistently implements. Throughout the time he has been in the public eye, he has portrayed unique and consistent usage of certain rhetorical tools. This has only solidified over time, forming a predictable use of rhetoric during his political life. However, this rhetoric does not mirror that of traditional presidential communication, and as a result of his personal strategy, Trump has created a more polarized America. His use of othering certain groups, such as the women he utilizes bdelymia on or those he goes after in his campaign ads, has only added to this. He has learned to use these strategies to his advantage.

Working under Personal Branding Theory and Dramaturgy, Trump has found rhetorical tools that allow him to be in control of his persona and its perception. By turning "Trump" into a brand, he has been able to curate a personal style and something marketable. And by developing various personas, Trump has mastered the art of performance. These strategies began development during his time as a real estate mogul and reality television star, leaving his earliest rhetorical tools to be shaped by living life as a celebrity. However, these strategies have followed him into the presidency, creating a distinctive collision of the Oval Office and a reality television set. By going from celebrity to presidency, Trump created a rhetorical method that is unique to his time in office. His use of language and communication tools strays from conventional

presidential rhetoric and turns a blind eye to the paths left behind for him by former presidents. He has instead forged his own way through his rhetorical tools. Donald Trump's full rhetorical toolbox includes figurative language, catchphrases, small stories, and object language under the frameworks of Personal Branding Theory and Dramaturgy.

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