

## 14 Fake Alignments

---

*Sylvia Sierra and Natasha Shrikant*

You read all about Dr. Martin Luther King a week ago when somebody said I took the statue out of my office, and it turned out that that was fake news.

President Donald Trump, Black History Month Listening Session on February 1, 2017

By early 2017, President Donald Trump had been repeatedly and widely accused of being racist and supporting policies that negatively affect minorities. Concerned about his reputation, his team arranged a televised Black History Month Listening Session to be held in the White House on February 1 (Trump 2017). Along with Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, the attendees would include African Americans in Trump's administration – Dr. Ben Carson (Secretary of Housing and Urban Development) and Omarosa Manigault (then-Director of Communications for the Office of Public Liaison) – as well as noteworthy African American leaders in industries such as media, church, military, and private industry (Bobic 2017). Trump knew well that this would be a damage control opportunity: The public would be watching closely to observe how he might connect with the participants and engage with issues important to members of the African American community. But this listening session would be like none other before it. Typically, during such events, a leader listens to participants' concerns, formulates some kind of empathic response, and makes an occasional verbal commitment to an informed administrative response down the line. After this session, though, Trump received harsh criticism from some mainstream media outlets for seeming ill-informed about African American history and for failing to focus on helping the community at stake. Instead, he used much of the time to complain about the seemingly unrelated topic of "fake news" in the media.

Some media outlets, including the *Washington Post* (Wootson 2017) and *CNN* (Merica 2017), pounced in particular on Trump's statement about Frederick Douglass: "Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more." They cited Trump's peculiar verb tense and vacuous phrasing as evidence that he was neither familiar with Douglass' achievements nor even aware that Douglass had passed away in 1895. Trump's praise of Douglass, they noted, was also in

keeping with his fixation with fame; he may not have known a thing about Douglass, but he understood that Douglass' prominence in public discourse was on the rise. Many headlines further critiqued Trump's failure to listen: "Donald Trump's 'Listening Session' on Black History Month Was Anything But" (Thrasher 2017), "Trump Began His 'Black History Month Listening Session' With a 'Media Complaining Session'" (Bump 2017), and "Trump Blasts Media at African-American 'Listening Session'" (Flores 2017), among others (e.g. Naylor 2017, Nelson 2017). These articles evaluated the event as a failure because Trump seemed self-absorbed, uninterested in engaging with the African American community's needs and struggles. He appeared to be using this meeting as yet another pedestal to preach his anti-media propaganda.

While criticisms of the listening session were numerous, the session participants acted as if they liked Trump. They laughed at his jokes about "fake news" and did not orient to Trump's statements as if they were deviant. Similarly, conservative media (e.g. *Fox News*, *The Drudge Report*, etc.) did not note anything out of the ordinary about Trump's session. How is it that Trump's actions can be evaluated as egotistical, ignorant about African American issues, and obsessed with criticizing media *and* as normal and unremarkable?

One explanation could be the relative positions of power of the parties involved. As president, Trump has long been supported by the African American attendees of this session as well as by conservative news media. What we highlight in this chapter, however, is the role of language use in facilitating alignment between Trump and his African American guests. We show that the conversationalists' identities and relationships are not altogether pre-existing, but rather emerge and are negotiated through the ways they interact with one another (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Trump did not simply command deference from his participants because of his status. Rather, Trump and his African American interlocutors *collaboratively achieved* congenial relationships through language use, and it is this appearance of friendliness that allowed the conservative media to ignore criticisms about Trump's behavior in the session.

In this chapter, we analyze moments in the listening session where Trump moves seemingly illogically from praising African Americans to complaining about mainstream news media. We show how this move is, in fact, effective in momentarily building relationships. While Trump would go on to make many statements and policy decisions decidedly unfriendly to minority communities, our analysis shows how he can nevertheless use a kind of linguistic sleight of hand to create the impression of being aligned with a community of speakers. In other words, we show how language use in this session functions to sustain enduring racial hierarchies through allowing Trump to ignore issues facing communities of color while still seeming supportive of these communities.

### 14.1 Talk Activities and Building Relationships

At the listening session, Trump engaged in two distinctive talk activities that we'll analyze here: praising and introducing African Americans, and complaining about the mainstream media. "Talk activity" is actually a formal concept in language studies, used to refer to the collaboratively developed and negotiated meaning of talk itself among speakers (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974). People constantly shift between different talk activities (Goodwin 1996) or blend multiple activities (Gordon 2008), such as flirting while complimenting. Why should we care about the details of shifting and blending talk activities? Since doing so is a collaborative process, it constructs relationships among those involved. In this chapter, we shed light on the relational work Trump is doing when he seems to shift at random from praising African Americans to commiserating about mainstream media. We also show how one of the African American supporters at the listening session follows Trump's lead by conducting an introduction while simultaneously joking and commiserating about the media. Ultimately, shifting and blending these talk activities contributes to the relational alignment work among Trump and the African Americans present at this event.

Below, we look closely at three excerpts that highlight how Trump and his conversationalists shift and blend talk activities that hinge on repeatedly making jokes about "fake news." First, it's helpful to understand how this short phrase accumulated its meaning in the weeks leading up to this event. Journalists, news pundits, and opposition candidate Hillary Clinton originally used "fake news" to explain how fictitious news stories on websites registered in Macedonia circulated on Facebook, swaying US citizens to vote for Trump in the 2016 election. Trump then co-opted the phrase as an accusation against any media he perceived as being biased towards him and his administration. He initially used the phrase on Twitter, and it subsequently became known as one of his catchphrases.

In the first two excerpts we examine from the listening session, Trump's disparaging jokes about "fake news" indirectly align Trump with the conservative African Americans in this interaction, while praising well-known African American figures functions as Trump's more direct attempt to relate with the broader community. The speakers at the event align with Trump's jokes primarily via laughter. An analysis of a third excerpt demonstrates how conservative commentator Armstrong Williams introduces himself by adopting Trump's humorous anti-media strategy. As he blends his introduction with disparaging the media, he receives additional laughter from the room and approval from Trump. Although shifting talk from praising Black History to disparaging the media might seem random and chaotic, our analysis shows how

206 Sylvia Sierra and Natasha Shrikant

this process is actually Trump's attempt to align with the conservative African American community.

#### 14.2 "Fake news from these people"

The first example, occurring about two minutes into the listening session, illustrates how Trump initially attempts to align with the broader African American community through praising Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK), but how he then shifts to complaining about the media (Trump, 2017; audio excerpt starts 02:18). We number the following lines for ease of reference in our analysis.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 TRUMP: last month we celebrated the life of  
 2 Reverend Martin Luther King  
 3 Jr. whose incredible example is unique in American history  
 4 you read all about (.) ((shifts eye gaze from reading to others))  
 5 Dr. Martin Luther King uh: (.)  
 6 a week ago when uh somebody said I took the statue out of my office (.)  
 7 and it turned out that that was (.)  
 8 FA:KE news  
 9 ROOM: ((laughter))  
 10 TRUMP: From these people ((gestures towards the reporters in the room))  
 11 FA:KE news.

Through reading his initial remarks, Trump celebrates and praises MLK. He uses "we" in line 1, establishing himself, his conversationalists, and the broader American public as being a singular community that "celebrated the life of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr." Trump then praises MLK, using "incredible" and "unique" to characterize MLK as an exceptional figure in "American history" (lines 2–3). These empty adjectives echo Trump's earlier characterization of Frederick Douglass as "amazing."

In line 4, Trump goes off-script. He shifts his eye gaze from reading to looking at his conversationalists, and switches pronouns from "we" to "you": "you read all about (.) Dr. Martin Luther King uh: a week ago" (lines 4–6). These verbal and non-verbal cues signal Trump shifting from speaking generally about celebrating MLK to addressing his conversationalists. Trump also shifts from praising MLK as a historical figure to relating a recent news story concerning himself and a statue of MLK, saying, "when uh somebody said I took the statue of out my office" (line 6). Trump then claims that the accusations was false, saying "it turned out that that was (.)" pausing briefly, likely for the effect of comedic timing, before referencing his popular, often-repeated joke, "FA:KE news," in line 8. His emphatic stress and vowel lengthening on "fake" signal to his conversationalists that this is a repeated and already-known reference (Sierra 2016).

Those present in the room demonstrate recognition and appreciation of the joke through laughter.

With this reference to “fake news,” Trump foregrounds his political similarities with his current conversationalists, all of whom are conservative Trump supporters. By shifting frames from praising African Americans to complaining about the media, he not only builds shared identity through foregrounding political similarity among participants, but also highlights differences with a common enemy: the media. Through this repeated joke and shifting from praising to complaining, Trump is also denying that he removed the statue of a famous and respected African American figure. This positions Trump as respectful of MLK, and by extension, Trump’s African American conversationalists and the larger African American community. The laughter from his conversationalists indicates their alignment with his joke, and subsequently the relational work he is doing. Trump then shifts in lines 8–10 from his general complaint against the media to a specific accusation against the media representatives in the room, pointing at them as he states “fake news . . . from these people.” Trump then repeats the phrase “FA:KE news.”

Overall, Trump’s repeated jokes about “fake news” help him to shift from praising MLK to commiserating about an MLK news story, and ultimately aid in resisting the portrayal of Trump as a disrespectful racist, instead highlighting his similarities with his current African American conversationalists.

### 14.3 “I don’t like watching fake news”

The second example, which occurs about one minute later in the listening session, illustrates how Trump constructs shared identity with his guests through simultaneously praising them and commiserating about the media. Just previous to this excerpt he had said, “I am proud to honor this heritage, and will be honoring it more and more. The folks at the table in almost all cases have been great friends and supporters” (Trump 2017; audio excerpt starts 3:41). Here he begins by praising two of the conservative African American personalities present at the listening session, Pastor Darrell Scott and Paris Dennard (a conservative political speaker), for defending Trump in what he perceives as a hostile media environment. Then he again shifts to commiserating through making another repeated joke about the “fake news.”

- 1 TRUMP: and uh
- 2 Darrell I met Darrell when he was defending me on television?
- 3 ROOM: ((laughter))
- 4 TRUMP: and the people ((gazes at Darrell)) that were on the other side of the argument didn’t have a chance right?=-

208 Sylvia Sierra and Natasha Shrikant

- 5 DARRELL: =that's right ((*laughing*))  
 6 ROOM: ((*laughter*))  
 7 TRUMP: and ((*points*)) Paris has done a- an amazing job in a very hostile *CNN* community,  
 8 ROOM: ((*laughter*))  
 9 TRUMP: he's a- he's all by himself (.)  
 10 he'll have seven people  
 11 and Paris  
 12 and I'll-  
 13 I'll take Paris over the seven  
 14 ROOM: ((*laughter*))  
 15 TRUMP: but I don't watch *CNN* so I don't get to see you as much as I [used to]  
 16 ROOM: ((*laughter*))  
 17 TRUMP: I don't like watching fake news=  
 18 UNKNOWN: =no- none of us watch it either [anymore  
 19 TRUMP: [uhuh ((*glances towards speaker*))

Trump praises Darrell in line 2, foregrounding his shared political identity with Darrell through stating Darrell was “defending me” in what has already been established as a hostile context, “on television.” Through joking about being conservatives who have to deal with hostile media, Trump not only foregrounds shared identity with Darrell but also receives laughter from fellow conservative audience members in response to this statement. This laughter, which recurs throughout this excerpt, contributes to affiliation (Glenn 2003) among those present.

Trump then compliments Darrell by adding, “and the people that were on the other side of the argument didn't have a chance right?” in line 4, implying that Darrell is a skilled debater. Darrell aligns with Trump, laughing and affirmatively answering his question with “That's right ((*laughing*))” in line 5. Others again align and bond with Trump and Darrell through their laughter (line 6). Trump then shifts from introducing to praising when naming another panelist, Paris. Similar to what he did with Darrell, Trump positions Paris as a skilled debater in a hostile environment (lines 7–13). Here, Trump constructs a shared identity through both praising and commiserating about the media. This foregrounds his political similarity with Darrell and Paris through constructing the media as hostile towards not only Trump, but also the African American media commentators who defend him. In addition, the fact that Trump is defended by these media commentators might appeal to Trump's wider base of African American supporters.

Next, Trump begins to shift from praising his invitees to snubbing the mainstream media by saying, “But I don't watch *CNN* so I don't get to see you as much as I used to” (line 15). Trump's audience laughs, similar to how they laughed when he said that he met Darrell when Darrell was defending Trump on television. Trump then repeats his prior joke, “I don't like watching

fake news” (line 17), shifting fully away from praising to solely complaining about the media. Then someone at the table (who we cannot identify because the camera was focused on Trump) aligns with Trump by declaring on behalf of the group that “none of us watch it either anymore” (line 18). This speaker briefly adopts Trump’s strategy of commiserating about the media, a move also highlighted below in the third example.

In this example, Trump’s joke about “fake news” facilitates a shift from praising his conversationalists’ ability to manage hostile media to simply commiserating explicitly about the media. What we want to underscore is that throughout all of this talk, even though on the surface it seems that Trump is randomly shifting from praising people to complaining about “fake news,” he is actually creating and maintaining relationships with his conservative African American conversationalists from start to finish. If anything, his “fake news” jokes serve a crucial role in bringing him together with his African American conversationalists on this occasion.

#### 14.4 “We try to be fair”

Several minutes later in the interaction, conservative commentator Armstrong Williams adopts Trump’s strategy of simultaneously praising an individual (in this case, Trump) and commiserating about the media. This allows Williams to align with Trump despite Williams’ membership in the media. This strategy receives laughter from the room and approval from Trump (Trump 2017; audio excerpt starts 9:38).

- 1 WILLIAMS: um Mr. President,  
2 I’m a-  
3 a member of the  
4 the- uh- what we call the media,  
5 where we try to be fair?  
6 ROOM: ((laughter))  
7 WILLIAMS: and objective.  
8 UNKNOWN: very fair  
9 WILLIAMS: u:m not ALL media  
10 uh seems to be the opposition party.  
11 there are those that see the GOOD that you do and we report it (and  
12 I’m just honored to have a seat at the table today.  
13 TRUMP: thank you Armstrong.

In light of the tone Trump has set, how can Williams engage in the delicate interactional task of defending the media (and himself) while still maintaining relationships with other participants? Williams begins by displaying respect towards President Trump through the formal address title, “Mr. President.” He



then prefaces his claim that the media can be “fair” and “objective” through using several linguistic moves that both delay and account for the norm violation (defending the media) that Williams is about to make (Shrikant 2019). First, Williams discloses that he is a member of the media, thus implying that he is qualified to speak about the media. He hedges and has a false start (“I’m a- a member of the the- uh-”, lines 3–4), which indicate that Williams is aware of the upcoming norm violation and hesitant about making it. Last, Williams uses “what we call” directly preceding “the media” (line 4). The formulation “what we call” indicates the shared understanding participants have about meanings associated with “the media.” Through showing that he is aware of this shared knowledge, Williams is able to maintain alignment with this group while still acknowledging that he is a member of the media.

After locating himself as a member of the media, Williams uses “we,” referencing the media community, and jokes, using question intonation, “we try to be fair?” (line 5). Through his question intonation on “fair,” Williams tests the water by speaking against the already established position among his current conversationalists that the media is not fair and does not attempt to be fair. This joke succeeds in eliciting laughter and alignment from speakers in this room. Even though Williams is disagreeing with accusations that the media is not fair, he shows that he is aware that he is disagreeing with the group’s assessment. He is able to elicit laughter and maintain his alignment with his conversationalists despite his membership of the media.

Williams then continues describing “not all media” as being “the opposition party” (lines 9–10). He states that there are “those that see the GOOD that you do” (line 11), followed by “and we report it” to characterize himself as part of that group. Thus, Williams defines being “fair” and “objective” as, in part, reporting about the “good” that Trump does. This further supports our earlier claim that Williams’ joke about the media being “fair” both acknowledges accusations against the media and serves to distance Williams from this accusation. These utterances align Williams with Trump while acknowledging Trump’s general distrust of news media. In closing his introduction, Williams again expresses his deference towards Trump through stating that he is “honored to have a seat at the table” (line 12), and Trump thanks him (line 13). After thanking Williams, Trump uses this opportunity to again complain about the media for thirty uninterrupted seconds. While Trump does not accuse Williams of publishing fake news, he positions Williams as an exception to mainstream media (saying things like “a lot of the media IS actually the opposition party . . . they’re so biased . . . it’s really a disgrace . . .” etc.). Thus, Williams’ self-introduction where he jokes about the media provides Trump the opportunity to shift completely to complaining about the media yet again.



How do we know that Trump's prior praising of participants and commiserating about the media is effective in building relationships? In part, because it gets taken up by other conversationalists. They laugh when Trump shifts from praising MLK to joking about "fake news" and when he praises Darrell and Paris while complaining about "fake news." The laughter shows that Trump is bonding and building relationships with these guests. Williams later uses Trump's strategy, aligning himself with Trump, to resist associations of Williams' media outlet with "fake news," and to bond with the conversationalists who laugh at Williams' joke. While Trump's discussion of "fake news" might seem like off-topic complaining, this shifting actually does consistent relational work, where Trump builds alliances – or at the very least, the appearances of them – between himself and African Americans throughout the session.

#### 14.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we paid close attention to repeated jokes about "fake news"; in turn, we looked at how these jokes facilitated shifts from praising and introducing to complaining and commiserating. Our analysis illustrates how Trump sidesteps racial identity in the Black History Month Listening Session and instead foregrounds political similarities with his conversationalists. We showed how he does this through highlighting shared political identity and perceived shared hostility that Trump and his conversationalists feel they face when engaging with mainstream media. Jokes about "fake news" play a crucial role in the relational work being done by the participants – foregrounding similarities in respect for African American figures, respect for current African Americans who defend Trump on hostile television, and political similarity instead of racial difference. The distinction that is made, in order to construct shared identities among those sitting at the table, is that the media is the opposition because it does not share this group's political ideals and is therefore "fake news."

This close analysis of linguistic data in its context shows us how this interaction is ripe for multiple interpretations because it is much more nuanced than it seems on the surface. On the one hand, when Trump shifts from talking about MLK to "lashing out at the media" as NPR reported, it can seem chaotic and disconnected. However, our analysis shows that these shifts and repeated jokes help speakers bond with one another in this situation. This analysis also helps explain why Trump simultaneously received criticism from the left for sidestepping race, but not from his politically conservative base for the same event. We argue that Trump avoids criticism from his politically conservative base because he constructs himself as a victim who shares experiences of victimization with his African American conversationalists (i.e. dealing with

the hostile media). While Trump's experiences as a rich, White, male business tycoon (and now President of the United States) are nowhere near the struggles that African Americans have faced historically and currently, the identity work Trump does here seems to imply that both are oppressed by the media. Thus, through ignoring racial inequality, Trump is able to appeal to his base and attempts to avoid the identity of racist oppressor through adopting the identity of political victim.

While we have revealed that Trump's jokes about "fake news" maintain relationships with his African American conversationalists, and more broadly, his politically conservative base, we want to underscore how his repeated joking about "fake news" has political ramifications. Not only do Trump's comments lend themselves to conflicting interpretations, they also delegitimize the free press in the United States and position Trump as an unquestionable authority as to what counts as "real" news. These political ramifications can be seen in the 2018 mainstream media protest against Trump for violating the First Amendment right to freedom of the press through repeatedly accusing the media of publishing "fake news" and of being the "opposition party" (Bauder 2018). In addition, while we show how listening session attendees co-participate in this process, we also need to acknowledge that Trump is in a position of extreme power (as president), and therefore participants might be more inclined to align with Trump as an authority figure and adopt his framing of the media. In conclusion, we have shown how focusing on close analysis of talk can illuminate how conversational practices that are otherwise puzzling, such as seemingly rambling and disjointed praising, complaining, and introducing, all rely on a vast, hidden store of sociocultural knowledge that is drawn upon to achieve social adhesiveness in a particular group of people at a national televised event.

### Note

1. In the transcriptions of the event, we highlight Trump's and his conversationalists' pitch, tone, cadence, and pace, all of which are features we use to infer the meanings that the conversationalists make relevant in interaction. CAPITALS indicate talk spoken with special emphasis. Colons after a vowel indicate an elongated vowel sound. A left bracket ([) marks the onset and a right bracket (]) marks the offset of overlapping talk. Numbers in parentheses – for example, (1.2) – note the length of silences in seconds, while a single period in parentheses (.) indicates a micropause of less than 0.1 seconds. A dash (-) marks the cut-off of the current sound. An equal sign (=) indicates "latching," where talk starts up in especially close temporal proximity to the end of the previous talk. Transcribers' comments and non-verbal actions are italicized in double parentheses ((*like this*)). Punctuation symbols are used to mark intonation changes rather than as grammatical symbols: a period indicates a falling contour; a question mark, a rising

contour; and a comma, a falling-rising contour, as might be found in the midst of a list. Each line of text (without a hard return) indicates talk spoken within a single breath group.

## References

- Bateson, Gregory. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Ballantine Books.
- Bauder, David. 2018. "US Newspapers to Trump: We're Not Enemies of the People." Associated Press article, August 16, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2OEuLbq>.
- Bobic, Igor. 2017. "Trump Convenes Black History Month 'Listening Session' with People Who Like Him." *The Huffington Post*, February 1, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2oK1ep7>.
- Bucholtz, Mary, and Kira Hall. 2005. "Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach." *Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4–5: 585–614.
- Bump, Philip. 2017. "Trump Began His 'Black History Month Listening Session' with a 'Media Complaining Session.'" *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2017. <https://wapo.st/2mpW5lk>.
- Flores, Reena. 2017. "Trump Blasts Media at African-American 'Listening Session.'" CBS News article, February 1, 2017. <https://cbsn.ws/2nYntHy>.
- Glenn, Phillip. 2003. *Laughter in Interaction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Goodwin, Marjorie Harness. 1996. "Shifting Frame." In *Social Interaction, Social Context, and Language: Essays in Honor of Susan Ervin-Tripp*, edited by Dan Isaac Slobin, Julie Gerhardt, Amy Kyratzis, and Jiansheng Guo, pp. 71–82. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gordon, Cynthia. 2008. "A(p)parent Play: Blending Frames and Reframing in Family Talk." *Language in Society* 37, no. 3: 319–49.
- Merica, Dan. 2017. "Trump: Frederick Douglass 'Is Being Recognized More and More.'" *CNN* article, February 2, 2017. <https://cnn.it/2vK8Yum>.
- Naylor, Brian. 2017. "In Black History Month 'Listening Session,' Trump Lashes Out at Media." NPR article, February 1, 2017. <https://n.pr/2nWOJ9x>.
- Nelson, Louis. 2017. "Trump Launches Media Attack during Black History Month Listening Session." *Politico*, February 1, 2017. <https://politi.co/2o4Donz>.
- Shrikant, Natasha. 2019. "'Who's the Face?': Communication and White Identity in a Texas Business Community." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 2: 254–71.
- Sierra, Sylvia A. 2016. "Intertextual Media References as Resources for Managing Frames, Epistemics, and Identity in Conversation among Friends." Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University. <https://bit.ly/2mtYueU>.
- Thrasher, Steven W. 2017. "Donald Trump's 'Listening Session' on Black History Month Was Anything But." *The Guardian*, February 2, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2o3JyEs>.
- Trump, Donald. 2017. "Black History Month Listening Session." C-SPAN video, February 1, 2017. [www.c-span.org/video/?423342-1/president-trump-holds-african-american-history-month-listening-session](http://www.c-span.org/video/?423342-1/president-trump-holds-african-american-history-month-listening-session).
- Wootson, Cleve R. 2017. "Trump Implied Frederick Douglass Was Alive. The Abolitionist's Family Offered a 'History Lesson.'" *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2017. <https://wapo.st/2kwLykX>.