

Book Review: Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse and Political Identity by Jennifer Sclafani

In Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse and Political Identity, Jennifer Sclafani offers a sociocultural linguistic analysis of the language utilised by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign, drawing on speeches, debates and interviews as well as popular reactions and parodies. While this is a useful starting point for scholars looking to understand the impact of Trump's linguistic style, the limited scope of this short book leaves some of the deeper and pressing political questions posed by his use of discourse underexamined, finds Jonny Hall.

***Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse and Political Identity*. Jennifer Sclafani. Routledge. 2017.**

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Coming from a political science perspective, the need for a linguistic analysis of Donald Trump appears paramount. A political outsider with no governing experience, Trump rhetorically blasted his way through discursive boundaries, the Republican primaries and eventually the electoral college. Trump himself appeared to acknowledge the importance of his rhetoric when stating at his first White House [press conference](#) that 'I won with news conferences and probably speeches'. It was thus with great anticipation that I read Jennifer Sclafani's *Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse and Political Identity*, especially given the ambitious scope of her subtitle.

Sclafani is a sociolinguist by trade and has been studying Trump's language for the [last two years](#) as well as undertaking some historical analysis of 'the Don' during his time hosting *The Apprentice*. Having worked previously on the discursive construction of identity, Sclafani is particularly well-positioned to answer the questions that come to my mind regarding Trump, his use of language and identity politics. Unfortunately, this is only a very small book numbering just over 100 pages, so these bigger questions are somewhat left aside.

Instead, Sclafani's primary aim is to understand the linguistic processes by which Trump made himself 'a viable presidential candidate from the position of a relative outsider' (18). Before moving onto this analysis, the issue of scope must be noted.

Sclafani is somewhat frugal with her data, restricting her study to the period between Trump's announcement of his candidacy in June 2015 until his acceptance of the Republican nomination in July 2016. Furthermore, data is primarily taken from only three television debates and four major speeches. This leads to possibly erroneous conclusions, such as the claim that Trump's interruptive style was normally him being humorous: I found very little evidence for this when looking at the three presidential debates with Hillary Clinton. Sclafani's detailed qualitative analysis obviously lends itself to small amounts of data, but I do believe that the book would be strengthened by the inclusion of the presidential debates at least.





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The author's analysis of Trump's idiolect (an idiosyncratic form of language unique to that individual) is largely confined to the second and third chapters of the book. In the former, Sclafani looks at Trump's 'discourse-marking devices', which are small phrases used to structure one's text (3). Of particular interest are Trump's use of 'believe me' and 'by the way'. Whilst Sclafani's identification of the latter as a clever alternative to the common dodging device of 'well' (which Trump used far less than other Republican candidates) seems far-fetched to me, the striking examples in the book are indicative of Trump's rhetorical evasion in the primary debates. 'Believe me', by contrast, was often used by Trump to hammer home his key points whilst encouraging audience participation. These are undoubtedly useful insights into the political purposes of Trump's rhetoric.

The third chapter of the book looks at Trump's 'interactional devices' (43): his use of interruption, gestures and constructed dialogue. Sclafani helpfully quantifies the instances of Trump interrupting both moderators and other candidates during the debates, confirming his uniquely bullish style – something that the presidential debates would confirm, I suspect. The discussion of Trump's gestures is admittedly interesting (see the video [here](#) for more on this), but the conclusion that Trump's 'large gestures come to index the candidate's brand as someone will work through the chaotic state of Washington and clean up the mess with his grandiose visions for the future of America' (61) seems vastly overblown, especially given the author's linguistic focus and deliberate avoidance of the content of Trump's rhetoric.

Sclafani's analysis of Trump's constructed dialogue (where direct reported speech is incorporated into Trump's language) includes some of the finest sections of the book. The author argues that Trump's repeated motif of 'I have a friend in [any given country]' gave Trump much-needed legitimacy in foreign affairs, whilst effectively stating 'I've always said that' functions as a megaphone for his own positions. Furthermore, in this section Sclafani makes her strongest link to the political context of Trump's campaign, noting that 'his tendency to voice *ambiguous collective others* [...] arguably work in the discursive construction of his populist message' (58, emphasis in original).

I understand that 'at the core of this short book is a dispassionate, descriptive analysis of Donald Trump's linguistic style' (19), but it is a shame that Sclafani does not spend more time on these distinctively political matters. The focus on 'metadiscourse' (how Trump's language was taken up and recontextualised in the media) is certainly a worthy academic pursuit for sociolinguists and political scientists, but Sclafani's analysis is almost solely limited to the satirical impressions of Trump on television shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. The discussion here is admirably detailed for those interested in the topic, but the chosen case study is a slightly perplexing one: why in a study of 'presidential identity' look at a section of metadiscourse where Trump was universally mocked?

On this point, I also found the lack of clarification of the term 'presidential' surprising. Throughout the text, Sclafani uses the term 'presidential', alongside 'presidential identity', as if using the word to [mean](#) 'having a bearing or demeanour befitting a president; dignified and confident'. The problem here, I would contend, is that part of Trump's appeal was the fact that he goes against the grain of the standardised image of 'being presidential'. There is a difference between voters thinking *I will vote for Donald Trump to be my president* and *I will vote for Donald Trump because he seems presidential*, but this is lost in the book. Beyond this, there is also the issue of how 'presidential' one can be when solely compared to other candidates from your party.

Although Sclafani's detailed linguistic analysis should be admired, the text is hindered by its scope, especially given the book's title. The author seems well-equipped to deal with the wider issues of metadiscourse and political identity, so it is a shame that this is not a longer text. I hope this is not the case, but perhaps the urgent 'need' for scholarship on the current president rushed the writing process. The book may provide a useful starting point for scholars working on Trump's linguistic style, but it unfortunately falls short on those bigger and more engrossing questions regarding Trump's discourse and identity politics.

Jonny Hall is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at the LSE. His research interests lie in American foreign policy, specifically counterterrorism discourse in the Donald Trump era and the value of presidential rhetoric in this area in historical comparison.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.