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Same Words, Different Work: Discourse Markers and Face in a Confrontational Interview Between Trump and Welker

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Abstract

Discourse markers are often dismissed as filler, yet in a confrontational political interview they may do interactional and face-related work. This study asks how Donald Trump and Kristen Welker use discourse markers to manage common ground and face in the Meet the Press interview broadcast on 7 June 2026, which Trump ended himself. It is a descriptive qualitative single-case study of 310 speaking turns from the official transcript, checked against the broadcast recording. Eight markers from Jucker and Smith (1998), namely yeah, oh, okay, really, well, like, you know, and I mean, were screened with an omission test and a semantic-bleaching test, which left 83 valid tokens from 146 candidate occurrences. Functions were classified as reception or presentation, and politeness strategies were interpreted with Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. Trump produced 71 tokens and Welker 12. Trump's tokens opened answers to questions that pressed him to commit and also sat inside his own long turns, where you know often presented a disputed claim as shared ground. Welker used only okay and well, always at the start of a turn, to accept, contest, or interrupt. A politeness strategy could be assigned to 40 of the 83 tokens, but to fewer than half of Trump's (32 of 71). Well and okay carried different social meanings in the two roles, and the termination of the interview, judged here to be the most face-threatening sequence in the data, contained no marker.

1. Introduction

Short words such as *well*, *you know*, and *okay* are among the most frequent items in spoken English, and they are also among the most readily dismissed. Jucker and Smith (1998) report that the students in their conversational corpus produced a discourse marker roughly every four to five seconds. In public commentary, and in some classroom

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advice, the same items are treated as filler that signals unpreparedness or evasion. The lay view starts from a correct observation, that discourse markers add nothing to the truth conditions of a sentence, and draws a doubtful conclusion from it, that they therefore do nothing (Jucker & Ziv, 1998). Removing *well* from a reply leaves the proposition intact, but it also removes a signal about how the reply relates to the question that came before it.

The question becomes harder in political interviews. A news interview is a form of institutional talk in which the interviewer asks, the guest answers, and a third party, the audience, listens without taking a turn (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991). The topics are often contentious, so almost every turn carries a risk to someone's public image as well as informational content (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Speech is also produced in real time and cannot be revised once uttered, which means that a broadcast interview preserves features that an edited text would remove. Under these two pressures a speaker has reason to lean on small devices that manage both how information is received and how the exchange affects each party's face.

Research on discourse markers in political interviews has grown in the last decade. Furkó and Abuczki (2014) adapted Jucker and Smith's distinction between reception and presentation markers to BBC and CNN interviews and found that markers behave differently there than in spontaneous conversation, especially in quoting absent parties and in controlling topic. Furkó (2017) later showed that a single pragmatic marker in political interviews can serve several manipulative functions, and that one manipulative strategy can be realized by many different items. Fu and Ho (2022) reported that the position of a marker in television interviews correlates with its function. Fu, Afzaal, and El-Dakhs (2024) compared *you know* and *I mean* in two mediatized interviews, and Fu (2024) examined *but* in BBC HARDtalk across groups of interviewees. Al-Azzawi and Abdul-Kadhim (2024) studied pragmatic markers in Trudeau's speeches, a monologic genre, where markers served cohesion and self-legitimation.

A separate body of work applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to the same genre. Macaulay (2017) argued that politeness and impoliteness in political interviews are used strategically and that interviewers hold latent power to threaten a guest's face. Reported distributions differ across settings. Positive politeness was the most frequent strategy in a political talk show (Haryanto, Indriani, Safar, Fansiska, & Dewi, 2024) and in U.S. presidential debates (Dalimunte & Wen, 2022), positive and negative politeness were balanced in Indonesian political talk (Yafi & Maris, 2025), and in a recent interview on the Iran war the interviewer relied mostly on negative politeness while the guest relied mostly on bald on record (Zelina, Hkikmat, & Wardoyo, 2026).

Two limits run through this literature. The first is that the two bodies of work rarely meet. Marker studies seldom ask why a speaker chooses a marker at a particular point in terms of face, and politeness studies code utterances without asking what the small devices around a threat are doing. The second is that the functional framework most often adapted, Jucker and Smith's (1998), was built on pairs of students talking cooperatively about neutral topics. Its distributional claim, that strangers use more reception markers and friends more presentation markers, assumes cooperative speakers with roughly equal power.

A political interview offers the opposite: unequal power, an agenda that is not shared, and an audience. In the literature reviewed for this study, no work was found that combines the two frameworks on one confrontational interview and compares interviewer and guest on the same forms. The interview examined here adds a further reason for interest. The guest ended it himself, which gives the earlier turns a high-stakes boundary to be read against.

This study therefore asks one question: how do Donald Trump and Kristen Welker use discourse markers to manage common ground and face in the Meet the Press interview of June 2026? Its objective is to describe what each speaker's markers do in sequence, which functions they perform in Jucker and Smith's (1998) terms, and what face-related work they accompany in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, while keeping the two speakers apart so that the same forms can be compared across roles. The novelty claimed is modest. It lies in combining the two frameworks on one confrontational event, in reading each marker against the act it accompanies and not against its form alone, and in treating the termination of the interview as part of the evidence instead of an afterthought.

2. Method

2.1 Research design

This study used a descriptive qualitative design with a pragmatic discourse-analytic approach, organized as a single embedded case study (Yin, 2018). The case is one speech event, and each utterance containing a discourse marker is a sub-unit of analysis. The design suits a question about context-dependent meaning, because the function of a marker cannot be read from its form (Jucker & Ziv, 1998). Frequencies are reported only as descriptive tendencies, following the view that simple counting can help a qualitative study see patterns without turning it into inferential analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The researcher was the main instrument for identifying, screening, and coding the data.

2.2 Data and data source

The data source is the Meet the Press interview between Donald Trump and Kristen Welker, recorded on 5 June 2026 in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and broadcast by NBC News on 7 June 2026 (NBC News, 2026a, 2026b). It lasts about 39 minutes and contains 310 turns, counted from Welker's first turn. For description, the transcript was divided by the topic that Welker introduces: Phase I (turns 1-167) on the Iran crisis, Phase II (turns 168-202) on the domestic economy, and Phase III (turns 203-310) on the anti-weaponization fund, election claims, and the press. Phase I covers 00:00 to 27:00 of the recording, Phase II 27:01 to 32:34, and Phase III 32:36 to 39:28.

Turn numbers follow the speaker-labelled blocks of the official transcript, counted from Welker's first block, so a sentence that one speaker begins, the other interrupts, and the first resumes occupies three turns, as in T8, where Trump's *yeah* sits between two parts of one Welker sentence. Every token is reported with its turn number and the broadcaster's timestamp for that turn. The recording date comes from the broadcaster's announcement (NBC News, 2026a) and the publication date from the transcript page (NBC News, 2026b). The phases only locate tokens in the interview and are not treated as variables.

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The interview was selected purposively as an information-rich, high-pressure case. It contained adversarial follow-up questions, competing turns, and answers that moved away from the question, and it ended with Trump leaving. It is not offered as a typical interview. The official transcript was checked against the recording to correct words, speakers, and overlaps. The recording was not used as evidence of function, so no claim in this article depends on intonation or manner of delivery. The recording was interrupted several times by rain and an audio problem, and turn boundaries follow the transcript as published, including those created by these interruptions. Because the interview is a public document that existed before the study, no informants were recruited.

2.3 Data collection procedure

The inventory consisted of the eight forms analyzed by Jucker and Smith (1998): *yeah*, *oh*, *okay/ok*, *really*, *well*, *like*, *you know*, and *I mean*. After repeated reading of the transcript, every lexical occurrence of these forms was marked, which gave 146 candidates. Each candidate was then put through two tests. The omission test asked whether removing the token leaves the truth conditions of the utterance intact. The semantic-bleaching test asked whether the original lexical meaning was still active, as in *like* meaning "be fond of", *really* as a degree adverb, or *you know* as a clause with an object. A token had to pass both tests to count as a discourse marker. For *oh*, the omission test is not distinctive, because an expressive interjection and a reactive marker can both be dropped without breaking the sentence.

The decision therefore rested mainly on orientation: *oh* was retained when it reacted to information and was treated as an interjection when it only expressed the speaker's own state. All four tokens of *oh* were retained (T78, T200, T222, and T226). Textual cues such as punctuation were used only as support. The screening left 83 valid tokens and excluded 63 occurrences. By form, the exclusions were *really* 8 of 9 (adjectival intensifier), *well* 9 of 33 (degree adverb, as in "doing very well"), *like* 25 of 27 (24 verb or preposition uses and one occurrence inside "unlikely"), *you know* 20 of 42 (a literal clause such as "you know that", a quiz question such as "you know what?", or a "do you know" question), and *okay* 1 of 11 (predicate adjective). *Yeah*, *oh*, and *I mean* had no exclusions.

The coding sheet records the reason for each exclusion and not a separate pass or fail score for each test, so the supplementary material reports the reason. Two pairs show where the line fell. In "Really? Well, you play right into their hands then" (T280), *really* reacts to Welker's reply and was retained, whereas "Not strong. Not strong. Really strong." (T173) was excluded as a degree adverb. Likewise *you know* in "It was, you know, it expired long ago" (T58) was retained, but "You know that these elections are rigged" (T284) was excluded because the clause takes an object, even though it also pressed Welker to agree.

That exclusion is a judgment, and it means the screening leaves out some literal clauses that do interactional work. Each retained token was entered in a coding sheet with its speaker, turn, timestamp, co-text, function, and politeness code. The sheet serves as an audit trail, and the supplementary material lists the 83 tokens and the exclusions by form.

2.4 Data analysis technique

Function was assigned from position and context, following Jucker and Smith (1998). Reception markers react to the interlocutor's information. Information-centered presentation markers modify the speaker's own information. Addressee-centered

presentation markers link information to what the addressee is assumed to know. Each token was read against three observations: the preceding turn, the action performed in the turn that contains it, and the response it received.

Because these categories are defined by function and not by word class, a token of *well* or *okay* could move from one category to another. Two decision rules extend the original framework.

First, a *well* at the start of a turn, directly after the other speaker's turn, was coded as a reception marker by default when the clause it opens takes in, accepts, or contests what that turn said, as in "Well, they've been largely decapitated" (T4) and "Well, 70% of farmers say they can't afford fertilizer" (T180). Position gives way to function in three conditions: when the *well* is repeated or follows another marker in the same utterance ("No, well, yeah, no, there's none", T230; "Really? Well, you play right into their hands", T280; the second *well* of T99), when it opens a quotation (T50), and when the clause it opens supplies a standard that the speaker offers for the addressee to accept.

Second, tokens inside quotations of absent parties were coded as information-centered presentation markers. Welker's "Well, it's not been presented in a court of a law" (T253) is the only token coded under the third condition, and it is the least secure code in the corpus, because T180 and T219 also set outside evidence against Trump's claims and were coded as reception markers. If T253 were recoded, all 12 of Welker's tokens would be reception markers and the corpus would hold 37 reception and 46 presentation markers. No claim in this article depends on that one token.

Politeness was coded for the utterance that contains the token and the sequence around it, because Brown and Levinson's (1987) strategies attach to acts and not to words. A strategy was assigned only when two conditions held. The speaker had to perform a face-threatening act toward the interlocutor, such as a refusal, correction, contradiction, interruption, demand, or attack, and an indicator had to show how the threat was handled. A hedge, concession, or preference wording counted as negative politeness. A presupposition of common ground, a claim of alignment, or a tag asking for agreement counted as positive politeness. The absence of any redress counted as a direct face-threatening act without redress (direct FTA).

This last label records form only, because Brown and Levinson's conditions for bald on record were not tested. Positive politeness was split into firm tokens, where the indicator is addressed to the interlocutor, and weak tokens, where alignment is claimed with a third party or the speaker's own record. The weak tokens do not meet the requirement of an indicator addressed to the interlocutor, so they are an explicit relaxation of the rule and are reported apart from the firm evidence. Tokens that met none of these conditions were coded as no clear strategy. No token met the criteria for off record.

All counts are counts of tokens and not of speech acts. Where several coded tokens fall in one turn, the acts were separated and given identifiers made of the turn number and a letter (for example T99-a and T99-b), and tokens that accompany the same act share one identifier. The 40 coded tokens are therefore not 40 independent acts. They fall in 33 turns, and six turns (T4, T50, T95, T99, T200, and T280) hold 13 of them. The 29 positive and negative politeness codes, which include the five weak tokens, rest on redress for an act, whereas the 11 direct FTA codes record only the absence of redress, so the two groups are reported separately.

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2.5 Trustworthiness

To keep the analysis open to inspection, weak and borderline tokens are named in the text and are not counted as firm evidence, tokens that depart from a pattern are reported as negative cases, and the two frameworks were used to test each other's readings. A sample covering all three phases was re-coded after at least two weeks for discourse-marker status and functional category. This intra-coder check did not cover the politeness codes, which are the most interpretive part of the analysis, and no second coder or agreement coefficient was used. Words per speaker were counted from the full transcript after coding and are reported in Table 1. The size of the sample and the number of changes it led to are not reported. Because the politeness codes were not rechecked, the face-related interpretations are less certain than the functional ones and should be read as arguable readings, not as verified results.

3. Results

3.1 Distribution of markers

The 146 candidate occurrences yielded 83 valid tokens, 58 of them in Phase I, 14 in Phase II, and 11 in Phase III. Trump produced 71 tokens and used all eight forms. Welker produced 12 and used only *okay* (7) and *well* (5). Table 2 gives the distribution, with *well* split by the function it performed. These counts are not rates, so Table 1 adds turns and words from the full transcript, with speaker labels and timestamps excluded. Trump holds longer turns, 37 words on average against Welker's 12, and produced 12.6 tokens per 1,000 words against her 6.2. Welker's rate rests on 12 tokens and eight forms, so the contrast is indicative.

By phase, Trump's rate was 13.3, 14.6, and 7.6 tokens per 1,000 words and Welker's 5.7, 5.1, and 7.7. Trump's mean turn fell from 47 words in Phase I and 52 in Phase II to 17 in Phase III, which offers a competing explanation for his lower rate in the last phase. The difference in position is more informative than the difference in count. Every one of Welker's tokens opens a turn directly after a Trump turn, whereas Trump's tokens both open his answers and sit inside turns that he continues.

Table 1. Turns, words, and tokens by phase and speaker

Phase (turns / words / tokens)	Trump	Welker	Total
Phase I	81 / 3,821 / 51	84 / 1,218 / 7	167 / 5,048 / 58
Phase II	17 / 890 / 13	17 / 197 / 1	35 / 1,089 / 14
Phase III	53 / 918 / 7	55 / 518 / 4	108 / 1,436 / 11
Total	**151 / 5,629 / 71**	**156 / 1,933 / 12**	**310 / 7,573 / 83**

Note. Totals include three short turns (11 words) by an unidentified voice, two in Phase I and one in Phase II. Words were counted from the full transcript, excluding speaker labels and timestamps.

Table 2. Distribution of validated discourse marker tokens by speaker

Discourse marker	Trump	Welker	Total
yeah	14	0	14
oh	4	0	4
okay/ok	3	7	10

Discourse marker	Trump	Welker	Total
really	1	0	1
well (reception function)	12	4	16
well (presentation function)	7	1	8
like	2	0	2
you know	22	0	22
I mean	6	0	6
Total	**71**	**12**	**83**

Note. Counts are of tokens; words per speaker are given in Table 1.

3.2 Functions of the markers

Reading each token against its sequence gave 36 reception markers and 47 presentation markers, a near balance in the corpus as a whole. The balance hides a sharp division by speaker. Of Trump's 71 tokens, 25 were reception markers, 16 were information-centered presentation markers, and 30 were addressee-centered presentation markers. Of Welker's 12 tokens, 11 were reception markers and one was an addressee-centered presentation marker.

Trump's tokens appeared under four conditions. The first was a question that asked him to commit to a label, a name, or a time. Asked whether the United States was at war with Iran, he began "Well, they've been largely decapitated" (T4), and when Welker pointed out that a naval blockade is technically an act of war he answered "Well, we have a blockade. It's been extremely effective" and then "I don't consider that a war, but if you want to define it as such, I guess you can" (T10). In each case the marker takes in the question without accepting its terms, and what follows delays, conditions, or redirects it. The same slot appears in "Well, I don't want to go into names" (T26), after a question that asked for names. A bare *yeah* served as plain acceptance when Welker stated a premise, as in T22, where his whole turn was "Yeah."

The second condition was his own long turn. Here 16 tokens repaired, illustrated, or quoted his own proposition, and 30 presented a claim as shared or asked Welker to follow it. T78 shows these functions together. Welker asked whether the United States would accept a deal that did not immediately end Iran's enrichment. Trump opened with "Well, you know, depending on when you say 'immediately'", which takes in the question and cushions an objection to its wording. Later in the same turn an *oh* sat inside a quotation attributed to "the fake news", and *I mean* repaired a claim he had just made too strongly, and a final *yeah* affirmed his own conclusion. Five tokens in one turn thus did five slightly different things, which is why function could only be assigned from the whole turn. The third condition was the voicing of absent parties. Three tokens of *oh* (T78, T200, T226) sit inside quotations of people he was criticizing, and these were coded as presentation markers because he is shaping his own narrative and is not reacting to Welker.

> KW [T77, 11:43-11:59]: Okay. Let's talk about what specifically you are demanding as a part of this short-term deal. Will the United States agree to a deal with Iran that doesn't explicitly and immediately give up its nuclear enrichment program on the front end?
>
> DT [T78, 11:59-13:00]: Well, you know, depending on when you say "immediately." Look, it is buried under mountains because our B2s were incredible. […]

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The fourth condition was challenge. When Welker pushed him on how long Iran would be given, Trump answered "Well I wouldn't say" (T97), and in the next turn, after she remarked that he had been talking for some time, the same form led into a counterattack: "Well I wouldn't say - well, you really haven't - again, you were in Vietnam for 19 years" (T99). The comparison he had earlier offered as background (T68) was now turned on the interviewer. Similar moves appear with *I mean* in T127, where he told her "You're supposed to give me the list", and in T157, where he dismissed polls "especially yours". By Phase III, *you know*, *I mean*, *like*, and *okay* had disappeared from his speech, and the forms that remained reacted to Welker's objections or attacked them.

Welker's 12 tokens appeared under three conditions, always at the start of a turn. She used *okay* to accept a Trump turn as finished and move on. After Trump said "I'd rather not say that", she answered "Okay. He is the son of the last Supreme Leader" (T45) and continued without asking again. The token acknowledged that the turn was complete and not that its content was right. She used *well* to contest a claim: "Well, 70% of farmers say they can't afford fertilizer" (T180) and "Well, it's not been presented in a court of a law" (T253). The second of these is the one token in her speech coded as an addressee-centered presentation marker, because it ties a legal standard that she supplies to his claim. Her third use was to manage the event. In T142 she began "Okay. I wonder if we should - let me just get a gut check here" before proposing a pause, so the acknowledgment came before an interruption.

3.3 Face and politeness

A politeness strategy could be assigned to 40 of the 83 tokens, 29 positive or negative politeness codes (five of them weak) and 11 direct FTA codes. Because direct FTA records only the lack of redress, the 40 should not be read as 40 independent acts (see 2.4). Table 3 sets the function and strategy distributions side by side. The social reading covers a minority of Trump's tokens (32 of 71) and a majority of Welker's (8 of 12).

Table 3. Pragmatic functions and politeness strategies by speaker

Category	Trump	Welker	Total
Function (Jucker & Smith, 1998)			
Reception	25	11	36
Presentation, information-centered	16	0	16
Presentation, addressee-centered	30	1	31
Politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987)			
No clear strategy	39	4	43
Positive politeness	17	0	17
Negative politeness	8	4	12
Direct FTA without redress	7	4	11
Total tokens	**71**	**12**	**83**

Note. Positive politeness for Trump includes five weak tokens (12 firm, 5 weak). Counts are of tokens, not acts.

For Trump, eight tokens were negative politeness, and six of them opened an answer in Phase I to a question that pressed him to commit. The coded face-threatening act is not the pressure the question puts on him but what he does to Welker in reply, namely

declining, correcting her wording, or leaving the question unanswered. The hedge ("I don't want to go into", "I wouldn't say", "I think") mitigates that act, and the marker marks where it begins. Seventeen tokens were positive politeness, 12 firm and 5 weak, and the weak ones are reported separately. They are *yeah* in T91, T135, and T230 and *you know* in T50 and T185. The alignment in T135 is with Netanyahu, in T185 with Trump's own record, and in T91 with a term he had himself used, T230 is debatable, and the indicator in T50 is weak, so none of the five meets the requirement of an indicator addressed to Welker that the firm tokens meet. and 11 of the 17 were *you know*.

The clearest cases presuppose knowledge that Welker is assumed to have, as in "very, very fine people from - actually from numerous places, you know" (T4), or offer a judgment for her to share, as with the second *you know* in T58 ("It was - you know, it expired long ago"). The tag in "But we won't have people shooting at us, okay?" (T95) asks her to agree. Not every *you know* counted. In the same T58, the first token only introduced a historical reminder and was coded no clear strategy, since it asked for no agreement. Seven tokens were direct FTAs, such as "you were in Vietnam for 19 years" in T99, and these rose from three of 51 tokens in Phase I to three of seven in Phase III.

The majority category for Trump was no clear strategy (39 tokens). These tokens carry no hedge, no claim of shared ground, and no attack on the interlocutor. That is a statement about the token and not about the talk around it. The *oh* in T226 ("Oh, isn't this nice?") is sarcastic, but its target is the people being quoted, and the turn it sits in is confrontational. If the five weak positive-politeness tokens are moved to this category, Trump's strategy-bearing tokens fall from 32 to 27 and the order of the categories does not change.

Welker's profile was different. Four tokens were negative politeness, all attached to acts that could be heard as breaches of the guest's right to answer on his own terms: the return to a question he had refused (T45), the interruption (T142), a correction (T128), and a rebuttal that opened with a concession (T235). Four tokens were direct FTAs, and three of those four (T180, T219, T253) rested on evidence from outside the interview, such as farm data, the absence of evidence, or a legal standard. Four tokens were plain transitions with no clear strategy (T53, T77, T120, T245). None of her tokens claimed common ground with Trump, and she addressed him as "Mr. President" or "sir" throughout.

3.4 The same forms in two roles

Well and *okay* are the only forms that both speakers used, so only they allow a like-for-like comparison. Table 4 summarizes it. The comparison shows that sequential position can be shared while social function differs. It also carries a caution. All of Welker's tokens of *okay* open her turn and all of Trump's follow his own statement, so for *okay* the difference cannot be traced to the form, the role, or the sequence separately.

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Table 4. Well and okay in the two speakers' turns

Form	Trump	Welker
well	19 tokens. Mostly opens an answer to a question that presses him. Six negative politeness, two direct FTA, 11 only delay or organize his own answer.	5 tokens. Opens a turn that contests his claim. One negative politeness, four direct FTA, none merely delays.
okay	3 tokens. Follows his own statement. Asks Welker to accept a claim (T95) or presses her to move on (T200).	7 tokens. Follows his turn. Gives acceptance or room (T77), or concedes before a rebuttal (T235).

Note. Counts are of tokens; the full utterances are listed in the supplementary material.

Two sequences show how these codes behave over a run of turns. In the exchange about the former FBI director and the January 6 defendants (T218-T236), six tokens produced five different combinations of function and strategy. Welker's *well* in T219 contradicted him without redress. Trump continued over her and then, in T222, turned her unfinished sentence into a sarcastic question with *oh* ("Oh, you think Comey was a straight cop?"), which attributes a position to her and was coded direct FTA. Her *okay* in T235 conceded before repeating the same rebuttal that had been unmitigated in T219. The strongest threats in the sequence, talking over her and the order "listen to me", contain no marker at all.

DT [T218, 34:45]: […] Comey was a dirty cop.

KW [T219, 34:54]: Well, there is no evidence to --

DT [T222, 35:03]: Wait a minute, wait a minute. Oh, you think Comey was a straight cop?

KW [T223, 35:04]: We had 170 people who pleaded guilty to assaulting police officers.

KW [T229, 35:28]: But sir, there -- there's no evidence of that. More than a thousand people pleaded guilty to crimes --

DT [T230, 35:32]: No, well, yeah, no, there's none. You know what they do?

KW [T235, 35:38]: Okay, but 172 people did plead guilty to assaulting police officers.

DT [T236, 35:41]: You know why they pled guilty?

The termination of the interview works differently. Trump extended the label "crooked", which he had applied to the press, to Welker herself (T278). When she answered "To be fair, I'm not crooked. But let's continue", his *really* and *well* in T280 ("Really? Well, you play right into their hands then") rejected both the defense and the invitation, and both were coded direct FTA. T280 contains the last marker in the corpus. From T281 to T310 no token qualifies. In that stretch Welker made ten consecutive turns asking to continue, and in T300 Trump ended the interview with "Let's call it quits because I've had enough."

The closing utterances threaten her positive face, by denying the impartiality that gives an interviewer her standing, and her negative face, by closing off the questions she had left. They contain almost no redress. The act is carried by whole utterances and not by any discourse marker. Severity was not scored for every act in the interview. "Most face-threatening" is a qualitative judgment based on the three weight variables of Brown and Levinson (1987), on the closing acts threatening both of Welker's faces, and on the fact that they come without redress; acts without markers, such as talking over her, were

not graded. The closing sequence enters the study as a negative case read against the marker-bearing turns before it, since no token qualifies after T280. Its lack of markers is an observation about this sequence and not proof of a general relationship.

> DT [T278, 37:55-37:59]: They're crooked just like you're crooked, your press is crooked. And Meet the Press is crooked.
>
> KW [T279]: To be fair, I'm not crooked. But let's continue.
>
> DT [T280, 38:00-38:02]: Really? Well, you play right into their hands then.
>
> DT [T300, 38:45-38:50]: You're a one-sided crooked network. Sorry. Let's call it quits because I've had enough. Thank you, darling. Have a good time.

4. Discussion

The first question the results raise is why Trump's repertoire is so wide and Welker's so narrow. The most direct explanation is the structure of the news interview. The interviewer is restricted to asking and the guest to answering, which creates an unequal distribution of speaking rights (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991), and institutional roles limit which turns are available to each party (Drew & Heritage, 1992). A marker that organizes a proposition inside a turn needs a speaker who is allowed to hold a long turn. The guest holds such turns.

The interviewer's turns are short, so the only place left for her markers is the start of a turn, where they connect to what the guest just said. This accounts for the difference in position at least as well as personal style does. It does not fully account for her complete absence from *you know*, *yeah*, and *I mean*, although her 1,933 words are about a third of Trump's 5,629, so some difference in opportunity is expected. A supplementary reading is the neutrality that news interviewers are expected to keep (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). A marker that presumes closeness can be heard as familiarity or partisanship, so a speaker who must appear impartial has a reason to avoid it. Personal habit remains a competing explanation, and one interview cannot exclude it.

This reading also bears on the framework that supplied the functional categories. Jucker and Smith (1998) found that strangers used more reception markers and close friends more presentation markers, and they read the difference as a reflection of how much common ground can be assumed. Welker's pattern resembles that of strangers, which is what one would expect of an interviewer who must establish the status of what she receives. Trump's does not. He faces an interviewer who is not his friend and yet relies most on *you know*. A plausible reason is that the distributional claim comes from cooperative conversation, where assumed common ground follows social closeness. In an institutional encounter, a guest with the right to a long turn can treat something as already known at little cost, whatever the social distance. The functional categories therefore travel to confrontational discourse, with the extensions made here, but the distributional pattern does not.

The comparison of *well* and *okay* supports a second point, that the social meaning of a marker is not attached to its form. This agrees with Jucker and Smith's contextual principle and with Brown and Levinson's (1987) position that the weight of a face threat depends on the situation and not on the speaker. When Trump is questioned, the risk lies in his own answer, and a marker at the start of it buys room to delay or reframe. When Welker disputes a claim, the risk lies in her challenge to the guest, and the same marker introduces that challenge. The direction of risk reverses, and the social meaning reverses

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with it. *Okay* shows the same reversal in terms of who accepts what. Acceptance is deference when the interviewer gives it to the guest and pressure when the guest asks for it from the interviewer. A listener who hears all of these as filler would hear one unit in T10 and T11 and another in T53 and T200, although they do quite different work. This is why a marker cannot be coded for politeness from its form alone.

Trump's most characteristic form, *you know*, needs separate comment. Jucker and Smith (1998) analyze it as an invitation to link information to what is assumed to be shared, which is close to the positive-politeness strategy of claiming common ground (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Three readings have to be kept apart. As addressee-centered presentation, a token only links information to what the addressee is assumed to know, which holds for 21 of the 22 tokens of *you know*. As positive politeness, it has to accompany an act that threatens Welker and show alignment as redress, which holds for 11 tokens, two of them weak.

As strategic insistence, it presents a claim as needing no proof, which is an interpretation of what the claim does for Trump's position and was not coded. That mapping holds only if the knowledge referred to is actually shared. Here *you know* often accompanied claims that were the point of dispute, so it did not maintain a relationship so much as present the claim as needing no proof. In T4 the act is the non-answer to the question whether the United States was at war, which the opening *well* of the turn also accompanies. "Fine people from, actually from numerous places, you know" presupposes that Welker knows who these people are, although the reference is disputed, and the second *you know* of the turn ("You know, there are a lot of people involved") treats her as a like-minded party in drawing a conclusion.

The evidence of alignment beyond the marker is the presupposed reference and the invitation to share the conclusion. In T58 the second token ("It was, you know, it expired long ago") offers a negative judgment of the Obama-era deal for Welker to share, whereas the first token of the same turn only introduces a historical reminder, asks for no agreement, and was coded no clear strategy. The study therefore keeps two layers apart: in form the utterance asserts common ground, and in function the claim supports the speaker's own position. The separation is an interpretation, since intent cannot be observed in a transcript. The claim should also be kept small. Eleven tokens of *you know* were coded positive politeness, but only the clearest cases (T4 and the second token in T58) were examined closely, and five positive-politeness codes in the corpus are weak, two of them tokens of *you know* (T50 and T185), so nine of the eleven are firm. The finding is that *you know* can present a disputed claim as shared knowledge, not that this is what it does in Trump's speech in general.

Trump's hedges raise a harder problem. Wording such as "I don't want to go into names" can be read as respect for the addressee's autonomy or as a way of avoiding the answer, and Brown and Levinson's framework has no internal means of telling the two apart. The negative-politeness code applies the theory in the ordinary way, because it attaches to an act Trump performs on Welker. A second, functional reading stays separate: the hedge also relieves him of a commitment, and the answer that follows does not supply what was asked.

That is the evasion documented in news-interview research (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). The evidence for it is what the turn does with the question, as when Welker cut into the hedge in T97 and treated the turn as an incomplete answer. In an adversarial

interview, then, the form of a negative-politeness hedge is not evidence of deference. Both readings can hold for the same token. The two frameworks also meet here. Jucker and Smith describe *well* in initial position as a signal that what follows does not align with the addressee's expectation. Applied to a question that demands commitment, the marker tells the addressee, and the audience, that the answer will not be the one asked for. The cognitive and social functions coincide, though the data cannot show that he intends the announcement.

The tokens that voice absent parties expose a gap in the politeness framework. Brown and Levinson's (1987, p. 65) definition of face-threatening acts refers to the speaker and the addressee, so a threat to the face of a quoted party, such as "the fake news", is a threat to no one in the interaction, and the token receives no code. Yet the quotation does social work, since the quoted party is made to look hasty or naive. Furkó and Abuczki (2014) described a related practice in mediatized interviews, and the present data agree. All the quoted parties were in conflict with Trump, and one of them, the press, is the institution Welker represents, so the quotation may reach her indirectly, although the transcript cannot decide this. For work that applies politeness theory to media discourse, a category for third parties seems necessary, since otherwise a sizeable part of what a political speaker does with markers falls outside the analysis.

Welker's conduct divides in a way that also needs explanation. She mitigated acts that interrupt or correct the guest and delivered some rebuttals without redress. The two kinds of act place different burdens on her role. Interrupting a guest or returning to a refused question imposes on his freedom to answer, a threat to negative face that calls for redress. A rebuttal that rests on a figure, an absence of evidence, or a legal standard threatens his positive face, but it places the source of the claim outside the interviewer. This fits the confrontation within a neutral frame described by Clayman and Heritage (2002), in which a journalist can be adversarial without appearing partisan. It also explains why none of her tokens is positive politeness, since a claim of shared ground with the guest would compromise neutrality.

The pattern differs from the one reported by Zelina et al. (2026), where the interviewer relied mostly on negative politeness, and it is consistent with Macaulay's (2017) argument that interviewers use confrontation selectively. The comparison is loose, since that study coded whole utterances and did not examine markers. One competing explanation remains. It could be the outside evidence and not the role that permits directness. The negative case in T235 speaks against this, because the same kind of evidence was introduced there with a concession. What seems to matter in addition is where the rebuttal falls in the sequence, in particular whether it follows a repeated attempt by Trump to close the topic.

The rise in direct acts in the last phase can be read through the weight of a face-threatening act, the combination of distance, power, and imposition in Brown and Levinson (1987). In Phase I the topic was foreign policy, and Trump could answer at length and delay with markers. In Phase III the topic was political legitimacy and the press, which concerns the image he has most reason to protect and on which Welker's institution was itself accused. The data are consistent with this account, but also with two alternatives: the drop in markers may come from shorter turns produced by interruption, and the phases differ in topic and are not fully comparable. The weight explanation is a hypothesis.

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The figures of three of 51 and three of seven are proportions among marker tokens and not rates of face threats in the interview. Table 1 shows that Trump's mean turn shortened from 47 words in Phase I to 17 in Phase III, and the topic, the rain and audio interruptions, and the chances to interrupt also changed between phases, so the escalation reading stays conditional.

The absence of any marker at the end of the interview is the most instructive result for the method itself. Jucker and Smith (1998) treat markers as devices that negotiate common ground and guide how information is processed. The termination was carried out by acts that reject the interaction frame itself, namely an accusation of dishonesty, a verdict on the network, and a closing formula, and these leave little common ground to negotiate. During the Comey sequence the threats were as direct, but each speaker still answered the other's last turn, and markers appeared in almost every exchange. While the frame holds, markers mark where one turn reacts to another. When Trump stops answering, the last marker comes before the rejection is complete. This is an interpretation of two sequences and not a test, and the closing turns may simply have been short statements and leave-taking formulas. It does suggest that the sequence judged most face-threatening needs a larger unit of analysis than the marker, and that research on confrontational interviews should treat termination as an object in its own right.

Compared with earlier work, the findings agree with Furkó and Abuczki (2014) that markers in mediatized interviews do things that casual conversation does not, and the *oh* inside quotations fits that observation. They agree in principle with Fu and Ho (2022) that position correlates with function, since *well* at the start of an answer takes in the question while *well* inside a turn organizes the speaker's own proposition.

This study adds a qualification for *okay*, where position cannot be separated from speaker. Most of Trump's *I mean* tokens fit the explanation subtype that Fu et al. (2024) distinguish, but two were aimed at Welker and the media in an attacking way, which their subtypes of hesitation, explanation, and cancellation do not anticipate. Two tokens are too few to propose a subtype. Al-Azzawi and Abdul-Kadhim (2024) found markers serving cohesion and self-legitimation in Trudeau's speeches.

Trump's long turns in the economy phase, where *you know* presents records and comparisons as background, resemble this, while his answers in Phase I do not. Within a single event, then, the use of markers shifted with whether he was asked to commit or free to give an account, though topic cannot be separated from this. Finally, Dalimunte and Wen (2022) and Haryanto et al. (2024) reported positive politeness as the most frequent strategy in a debate and a talk show. Here positive politeness was second to no clear strategy, which suggests either that the genre matters or that coding at the level of the marker, with a requirement for an explicit threat, assigns fewer strategies than coding utterances.

Three theoretical implications follow, each drawn from one interview and offered for testing. First, the cognitive function of a marker and its social function can coincide or come apart, and neither framework alone shows which. Second, a politeness strategy attaches to an act in a sequence, and the marker indicates the position of that act without carrying the strategy. Third, politeness vocabulary applied to mediated, adversarial talk needs a place for third parties and a way to keep the functional reading of evasion apart from the code.

5. Conclusion

In this interview, the pragmatic functions of discourse markers followed the speaker's role and the sequence of turns more than the form of the marker. Trump used all eight forms, at the opening of answers and inside his own long turns. His markers took in questions that asked him to commit, presented claims as shared ground, voiced absent parties, and, as the challenge grew, moved from cushioning to countering. Welker used only *well* and *okay*, always at the start of a turn, to accept a Trump turn, contest a claim, or manage the event. Face concerns explained a minority of Trump's tokens (32 of 71) and most of Welker's (8 of 12), and the forms the two speakers share carried different social meanings. The termination of the interview, judged the most face-threatening sequence, contained no marker.

For theory, the reception and presentation categories proved usable in confrontational talk, but only with two extensions, and Jucker and Smith's (1998) claim about common ground and social closeness did not carry over to an institutional setting. Politeness theory accounted for part of what the markers did and left a residue that only the functional account describes. Two kinds of limit need to be kept apart. Some belong to the operational coding used here: tokens and not acts were the unit, the direct FTA label records form only, and the weak tier relaxes the interlocutor requirement. Others belong to the theory as formulated. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) define face-threatening acts in terms of the speaker and the addressee, so a threat to a quoted third party has no place in the scheme as it stands, and the framework cannot by itself separate deference from evasion in a hedge. These conclusions come from one interview with one person in each role, so institutional role cannot be separated from personal speaking habit.

The study has clear limits. It analyzes one interview, coded by one researcher, and the recoding check did not cover the politeness codes. Welker's profile rests on 12 tokens from two forms, so it is supported by the consistency of the pattern and by negative cases and not by numbers. Rates per 1,000 words rest on small token counts, and the transcript cannot show intonation or manner. The recording was also interrupted by rain and an audio problem, so some short turns may reflect production conditions. The inventory was limited to eight forms. Later studies should include more than one interview with different interviewers and guests, widen the inventory, add a second coder with an agreement measure that covers the politeness codes, and use audiovisual data.

Because politeness strategies attach to speech acts, they should also be coded at the level of the act, with the marker's contribution assessed as a separate step, and acts that no marker carries, such as ending an interview, should be analyzed as whole sequences of turns. For teachers and learners, the findings suggest that a marker's function has to be read from position, context, and speaker role together, and not from a list of equivalents.

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