The democratic king: The role of ritualized flattery in political discourse

Roni Danziger
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract
Research has shown that personality cults are a strategy to further political legitimation. They function to secure a leader’s position in the absence of democratic legitimation methods by using excessive flattery towards the leader. Habitual public flattery towards democratic leaders has not received scholarly attention, even though it can provide insight into the danger authoritarian discursive rituals can have on democratic processes. By applying a ritual perspective to a comparative case study analysis, this paper illustrates how political flattery is not just an instrumental means for self-promotion in the political order, but also a manipulative and antidemocratic exploitation of epideictic rhetoric. Furthermore, the implicit requirement for ritualized flattery hinders accountability and deliberative decision-making, and the process of integrating differences of opinion or interest towards a collective and impartial political practice. Leaders who surround themselves with sycophants encourage opinion- and action-conformity to whatever pleases that specific leader.

Keywords
CDA, cult of personality, epideictic rhetoric, flattery, democracy, political discourse, pragmatics

Introduction
One year after President Donald Trump was elected, a Washington Post journalist termed our time ‘the golden age of flattery’ (Caryl, 2017). News articles filled webpages with commentary about world leaders flattering Trump as a direct way to the newly elected president’s heart (Merica, 2017; Miller, 2017). However, although the Trump presidency has changed some of the norms of political discourse (Wodak et al., 2021), the statement...
that we live in an age of flattery is simply not new: Flattery has accompanied political discourse throughout the ages, at least from documented classical times (Kapust, 2018). Spectacles of flattery towards state leaders are still prevalent in political discourse today, not only towards Trump but also towards leaders such as Russian President Putin (Sperling, 2016), Turkish President Erdogan (Uysal and Schroeder, 2019), and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu (Alper, 2018). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of political flattery has been largely ignored by discourse analysts, despite its social and political consequences. Whereas interpersonal flattery in which political actors deploy positive communication strategically in order to gain political power reasonably exists in any type of regime, this paper claims that the existence of ritualized public flattery in a democracy promotes an authoritarian cult of personality that holds detrimental potential.

A personality cult is a political legitimation strategy that functions to secure a leader’s position in the absence of democratic methods of legitimation (Cassiday and Johnson, 2010; Sperling, 2016), most strikingly by using ‘excessive flattery and adulation [. . .] of the leader’ (Crabtree et al., 2020: 411). Uysal and Schroeder (2019) found that Twitter accounts of public diplomacy in Turkey function mainly as a ‘new’ cult-of-personality tool that presents Erdogan as the embodiment of Turkey’s good values. Sperling (2016) analysed the macho masculinity promoted in Putin’s cult of personality (or ‘Putinania’; Cassiday and Johnson, 2010), which she claims is a manipulative cultural framing tool aimed at gaining symbolic domination. Drawing on cults-of-personality research, the discursive pattern of public flattery towards powerful actors in a democracy could be considered a symbolic political performance that lends excessive power to its users. Identifying undemocratic patterns and analysing them in comparison to non-democratic regimes allows tracing attacks on democracy at an early stage and promoting countermeasures (Ron et al., 2020).

This paper focuses on ritualized political flattery and its potential implications on a democracy. Characterizing political flattery as ritual helps explain, in part, why, despite the perception of flattery as inappropriate in political discourse (Kampf and Danziger, 2019), it continues to thrive in certain democracies. I will make the case that a ritual perspective allows us to see political flattery not just as an instrumental means for self-promotion in the political hierarchy, but also as an undemocratic cult of personality. To that end, I will first outline the discursive patterns of ritualized flattery in two democracies (Israel and the US) and then compare them to two authoritarian regimes (Russia and Turkey) that display cults of personality towards their leaders. The literature review that follows will first describe the socio-pragmatic phenomenon of interpersonal flattery. Then, it will conceptualize habitual political flattery as ritual by situating political flattery in epideictic rhetoric as a discursive pattern that exploits the symbolic performance of social values in an undemocratic way.

**What is undemocratic about political flattery?**

Flattery represents the dark side of sociability because it brings forward the strategic side of positive language use that speakers can exploit for their benefit. Flattery is commonly considered manipulative (Kapust, 2018) and its use comes with a social warning against its negative consequences (Danziger, 2020). Everyday interpersonal flattery strategically
exploits conventional positive actions, such as positive evaluation speech acts (e.g., praise, compliments), and positive politeness strategies, such as terms of endearment, friendliness and asserting common ground. As such, it is not a conventionalized speech act and it can potentially manifest in a variety of pragmatic strategies. This qualifies flat-tery as an interpretive construct; that is, the suspected action is interpreted and commented on as flattery by at least one participant in an interaction. By labelling conventional language use as flattery, actors express their interpretation of the communicative action in question as instrumental. Without the explicit judgement made by a participant in the interaction, the instrumental intention remains covert. Consequently, it is only through meta-pragmatic labelling that flattery can be discursively analysed (Danziger, 2020). This previous study has further shown that there are six reasons why certain actions would be interpreted as flattery: (a) the addressee is deemed underserving of the positive action, (b) there is a recognized benefit to the speaker, (c) there is a pattern of ingratiating behaviour, (d) the message is exaggerated or hyperbolic, (e) unequal power-relations exist between the flatterer and the addressee, and lastly, (f) there is a public context.

In relational-work theory (Locher and Watts, 2005), any marked social behaviour is either positively or negatively noticed and commented on by participants in an interaction according to their judgement of social norms and appropriateness of language in context. In order to achieve a positive effect that will please the addressee, flattery has to be non-conventionalized so it will remain marked, that is, noticed and unexpected in context. The pleasing effect flattery intends to achieve mediates one of three interactional goals: transactional – offered in exchange for what the flatterer desires; self-promotional – used for image management; or relational – used to establish, strengthen, or maintain relations (Danziger, 2020). These functions are applicable to political discourse, where actors deploy communicative strategies in order to gain and maintain power and influence and promote self-interest by cultivating relationships with other members of the political community (Kampf and Danziger, 2019; Thompson, 2000).

Literature about flattery in social psychology and organizational sociology aids in understanding the effect ingratiating behaviour has on powerful actors. It has not only established that flattery works, but also that it remains effective even in instances where the ulterior motive is clear to the addressee (Chan and Sengupta, 2010; Vonk, 2002). This finding led scholars of organizational sociology to explore the insidious effects of flattery and opinion conformity towards corporate leaders. Park et al. (2011) report that ingratiating behaviour holds the potential to create social influence by invoking two norms of reciprocity: reciprocal attraction and reciprocation of favour. Reciprocal attraction following flattery is created because ‘people find it hard not to like those who [appear to] think highly of them’ (Jones, 1964: 24); reciprocation of favour is achieved because people feel compelled to return favours when one is given to them (Vonk, 2002). The political world is arguably a specific kind of workplace that has clear power relations and hierarchy. Like corporate CEOs, state leaders hold the most power in the political system, making them salient targets for flattery from lower-level officials who operate within a competitive environment for the attention of an actor who controls access to valued resources (Kapust, 2018; Jones, 1964; Park et al., 2011). The peril of ingratiating behaviour in the corporate world is double: it both achieves a positive effect for the flatterer, who is rewarded for ingratiating behaviour and the addressee feels self-enhancement and over-confidence that
lead to a negative bias in strategic decision-making (Park et al., 2011). It follows then, that political leaders who are susceptible to flattery will feel over-confident and have a false sense of competence when they are not held accountable for their actions. The resemblance to the corporate world ends with Park et al.’s final conclusion, because unlike the corporate CEO who can be dismissed by the board of directors, the political leader can take action towards maintaining his rule by changing the ‘rules of the game’ (two current examples of this strategy can be seen in President Erdogan and President Putin’s actions to prolong their positions via constitutional changes1).

**Flattery in political discourse**

In hierarchical relations like the political world where power is an essential element (Wodak, 2009) and speech is strategic without pretense (Blum-Kulka and Weizman, 2003), flattery is a powerful tool for promoting self-interest (Chan and Sengupta, 2010; Vonk, 2002). The confrontational character of political discourse coupled with the prevalence of media in public life, which further intensifies power struggles and the presence of conflicts, creates the distinctive logic of the political world (Kampf, 2013; Wodak, 2009). It therefore follows that political discourse complies with different social norms from interpersonal everyday discourse (Blum-Kulka and Weizman, 2003). This assumption has led Wilson (2002), for example, to suspect all performances of political solidarity as manipulative.

A previous study (Kampf and Danziger, 2019) analysed speech acts of solidarity that communicate admiration and appreciation in public discourse and how they are used in the Israeli context. Public approbation rituals were conceptualized as epideictic rhetoric – the language of public praise and blame – which sets models of civic behaviour in a specific society. Publicly assigning nobility or baseness to actors and actions marks the desired and undesired values in that community (Beale, 1978; Hauser, 1999). Kampf and Danziger (2019) analysed a speech event in which a compliment was deemed non-politic or ‘exaggerated praise’ because of three digressions from the political norm: (1) the receiving actor was deemed undeserving, (2) the context was considered inappropriate and (3) the hyperbolic language was experienced as unbecoming to a democratic society. Flattery in authoritarian regimes, that is, cult-of-personality rituals, have been studied in political science (e.g. Crabtree et al., 2020: 411), where they are described as ‘godlike glorification of a modern political leader’ by deploying ‘rhetorical extravagance’ and adulation rituals. Cults of personality arise when the authoritarian leader’s power over subordinates has given way to personal, unconstrained rule that reinforces the dictator’s paramount political standing.

The perils of political flattery have been repeatedly discussed in major works of political thought, such as Machiavelli’s (2005) *The Prince* and Catiglione’s (1975 [1928]) *Book of the Courtier*. In his book, Kapust (2018) surveys the role flattery has played in various political systems and suggests that there are two types of political flattery: cunning and demoralized. In the first, cunning actors intentionally flatter in order to advance themselves in the political order; in the second, less powerful actors who are fearful and dependent are required to perform flattery in order to survive in the system. According to Kapust (p. 4), flattery is ‘habitual and rooted’ in power relations between subordinates and vain superiors. Moreover, it is potentially detrimental to governance because such
leaders gradually become more powerful, never having to be accountable for their actions. This analysis of political flattery as habitual in political discourse allows it to be studied in a ritual framework.

**The current study**

In this paper I adopt a ritual analytic framework to study the perils of political flattery. The benefit of this framework stems from the strong explanatory power of rituals (Bennett, 1980; Carey, 1989; Lipari, 1999) due their essential role in society (Alexander, 2011; Goffman, 1967; Turner, 1982). Unsurprisingly, political rituals have drawn scholarly attention because giving them scholarly attention can promote timely countermeasures (Ron et al., 2020), that is, informed political action by the public.

In order to analyse the undemocratic ritual of political flattery, I use Lipari’s (1999) definition for ritual, which is based on several research traditions in communication, anthropology and sociology. Her definition permits studying a range of behaviours as ritual without being too general:

> A structured social and symbolic activity that invokes, demarcates, or celebrates a community’s deepest and most closely held values, of what it holds to be sacred. Ritual is thus context, rather than purely content, depended. (p. 88)

Habitual public flattery towards a political leader fits Lipari’s definition: it is a structured social and symbolic activity that demarcates a community around core values in a democracy. As the previous section has shown, flattery represents the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable positive social behaviour; the peril of exploitative use of conventional positive behaviours for self-interest in everyday discourse; and the peril of self-promotion through the political hierarchy not by merit, but by cajoling powerful actors.

Flattery in political discourse can be analysed as a ritual because it is essential to a society’s public discussion of social values: what is and is not commendable in a democratic society. Lipari’s (1999) definition therefore aids in placing flattery as a socially coded norm violation. The civic norm of approbation is breached by exploiting epideictic rhetoric towards an authoritarian-like cult of personality that undermines democratic values. This paper will demonstrate that ritualized flattery in political discourse elevates the leader to a symbolic status that outranks the actual ‘god’ of democracy – the public (p. 94). Applying a ritualistic framework allows identifying the recurrent discourse patterns of political flattery and their detrimental potential to a democracy. Establishing political flattery as ritualistic demonstrates the implicit requirement for its performance.

The first part of the analysis outlines the basic elements of ritualized flattery in democracies by applying a socio-pragmatic analysis of a multipartisan interaction (Goffman,
1981; Levinson, 1988) and a politeness framework (Locher and Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2007). The analysis will be applied to two representative cases of subordinates performing flattery towards leaders highly associated with ritualized flattery in Israeli and US politics – PM Netanyahu and President Trump – in the context of cabinet meetings. In the second part of the analysis, ritualized flattery events in the context of birthday wishes towards leaders will be comparatively analysed between democracies (Israel and the US) and hybrid autocracies (Russia and Turkey). Demonstrating similar discursive patterns of political flattery between these regime types will provide evidence that ritualized flattery towards leaders is incompatible with democratic values.

**Ritualized flattery events in the Israeli and US contexts**

Outlining participation roles and their emerging patterns of discourse illustrates how power is used and reproduced in ritualized flattery events. Each public ritual of flattery in a democracy will involve the following participation roles (Goffman, 1981; Levinson, 1988): An *addressor*, the flatterer, who initiates the ritualized flattery event and is trying to gain political power by performing solidarity towards the high-ranking political actor (presumably, the leader) and an *addressee*, the receiver of the communicative action, who is a public figure in a powerful position and for whom the ritual provides further maintenance of power, an actor who implicitly or explicitly promotes the use of flattery as a legitimate political tool. In addition are two essential *ratified over-hearers*: the *media*, which mediate the interaction for the public while suggesting a frame for interpretation, and the *public*, which witnesses the interaction through the media. These over-hearers will be the source of interpretive judgement marking the event as flattery. Further, members of the political community can be *non-essential ratified over-hearers* (optional role): They may or may not be present at the ritualized flattery event, and/or participate in the public discussion by accusing the speaker of ingratiating behaviour.

**Israel: ‘Like a king in India’**

The political context of Israel is beneficial in analysing ritualized flattery in political discourse because its leader of 11 years, PM Benjamin Netanyahu, is strongly associated with public acts of flattery (Alper, 2018). As evidence, a headline from 11 October 2018 announced that ‘The ass-kissing [lit. licking] ritual towards Netanyahu has gone too far’. Journalists reported numerous incidents of Likud members flattering PM Netanyahu, among them Likud MKs Jackie Levi and Ayub Kara (Haaretz, 2018); Yuval Steinitz (Hason, 2019); Amir Ohana (Verter, 2019); and newcomers May Golan, Miki Zohar, Osnat Mark and Shlomo Karhi (Amano, 2020). However, the political actor most associated with flattery towards Netanyahu is MK Miri Regev. Her reputation as a flatterer can be seen in a skit performed by a popular Israeli TV satire, in which the cast participated in a mock reality show titled ‘The Next Miri Regev’. In it, the show satirized up-and-coming Likud member May Golan for her flattery of Netanyahu on his seventieth birthday on Facebook, a move typically ‘reserved’ for Regev.

The flattery case chosen for this study is an event precipitated by Regev towards Netanyahu. Although all the aforementioned events were reported as public flattery
towards Netanyahu by political actors, this one is representative and was highly discussed in the public sphere, with 2019 journalistic references (news reports, articles, commentaries and editorial letters) in that week’s news cycle alone. The event in question took place during a 21 January 2018 cabinet meeting. Regev was minister of culture and sport and a high-ranking Likud member. Netanyahu had just returned from a six-day visit to India to celebrate 25 years of diplomatic relations and the recent opening of economic and commercial relations. The cabinet meeting was about to begin, in the presence of media outlets. Unexpectedly, Regev took the stage and said:

Prime Minister thank you very much for the support and recognition for the State of Israel, but it is also time to thank you. Thank you very much. For the policy that you are leading, the foreign policy that we have never had before in the State of Israel. You are a great leader, even though some people in this country don’t like to say so and don’t like to demonstrate it. But the truth must be told, you deserve this to be told: You did us a great service, with much honour and pride. I followed the reports of your activity and of the great honour with which you were welcomed there, like a king in India. It just moves [me] to tears, thank you so much for what you do for Israel in the world. I wish you many more years of good public work’. (Haaretz)

The US: ‘The greatest privilege of my life’

Journalists and scholars alike report on Trump’s ‘need for flattery’ (The Economist, 2017) both by his subordinates (Cohen, 2018) and his peers (e.g. O’Shea and Maslow, 2020). A similar flattery event occurred during President Trump’s first cabinet meeting after his election, held on 18 January 2017, less than a year before the Regev–Netanyahu event. At the beginning of the meeting, each member said a few words: some thanked him for assembling the ‘great team members’ around the table (Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue) and others expressed the ‘incredible honour’ of serving under his leadership (Health and Human Services Secretary, Tom Price). VP Mike Pence precipitated the event with the following words:

It is just the greatest privilege of my life is to serve [...] as vice president to the President who’s keeping his word to the American people and assembling a team that’s bringing real change, real prosperity, real strength back to our nation.

Participation roles in a ritualized flattery event

Both the Regev–Netanyahu and the Pence–Trump events are multiparticipant interactions, with subordinate political actors performing solidarity-oriented actions towards
the most powerful actor in their hierarchy. The interactions occurred face to face to a present audience of peers and media outlets. The context in which these interactions took place, a cabinet meeting, is not usually a context in which praise and compliments are expected (Kampf and Danziger, 2019), so that the verbal performance is marked because it is unexpected in context. Moreover, the objects of praise (Netanyahu’s visit to India; Trumps’ personal qualities) are not directly relevant to the activity type (Levinson, 1979) of a cabinet meeting, where high-ranking political actors meet to discuss and advise the leader about policy and government actions.

As noted by Lipari (1999), context is a crucial factor in performance of ritual and the context of a ritualized flattery event is a complex one. The flatterer is burdened with performing a marked positive communicative action that does not cross acceptability within the context it is carried out. Namely, performance of ritualized flattery events should be marked in order to achieve its pleasing effect, without crossing into face harm (Danziger, 2020). In political discourse, flatterers are additionally burdened with finding a balance between expectedness and unexpectedness: The powerful actor expects the performance of the flattery ritual in principle, but the actual performance must be marked in order to achieve the addressor’s goal.

The role of the addressee. Flatterers initiate the ritualized flattery event, trying to gain political power by performing solidarity towards high-ranking political actors (presumably, the leaders). By publicly performing such approbation, the addressors risk being labelled flatterers if they exceed the contextual norms. However, they will presumably deploy flattery despite its incompatibility with political norms and its supposedly blatant strategic use because it holds great rewards for its user, as the discussion above about what is undemocratic about political flattery has shown.

In her performance, Regev used conventional solidarity-oriented actions such as thanks (e.g. ‘Thank you so much for what you do for Israel’), compliments (‘You are a great leader’), praise (‘You did us a great service, with much honour and pride’), good wishes (‘I wish you many more years of good public work’), and positive affective language (Caffi and Janney, 1994; ‘It just moves [me] to tears’). Additionally, the lexical choice of the noun ‘king’ implies that Netanyahu is deserving of the same norms as royalty. Pence also used positive affective language (‘It is just the greatest privilege of my life’) and indirect approbation of Trump’s trustworthiness (‘keeping his word’) and competence (‘assembling a team’).6

Since flattery is intended to be face-pleasing to the addressee (Danziger, 2020), the instrumental appeal of flattery can be outlined by applying Spencer-Oatey’s (2007) framework for analysing face needs. Both Regev and Pence appeal to all three faces of their superiors: their quality face (the fundamental desire to be valued for personal qualities) by presenting a positive evaluation of their competence and abilities (Regev: ‘You deserve this [to be told]’, Pence: ‘assembling a team that’s bringing real change’); their social identity face (the fundamental desire for our social role to be valued by the group) as leaders, Regev focusing on Netanyahu’s public worth (e.g. ‘You are a great leader’, ‘like a king’), Pence on reinforcing Trump’s identity as a trustworthy and reliable president (‘keeping his word to the American people’); and their relational face (the specific roles taken in an interaction), Pence and Regev are discursively situating themselves as
subordinates, thus re-establish the power dynamic in their flattery. In addition, the effectiveness of solidarity-oriented speech is intensified in a public context (Danziger, 2020) due to the presence of overhearers at the event.

The flatterers are acting symbolically, assigning nobility to the leader of the specific society by deploying conventional approbation and gratitude. Regev positions herself as a representative of the ‘ingroup’, explicitly aligning herself with the ‘people’ when she says: ‘You did us a great service’. She also positions herself as a brave political actor who is not afraid to express an unpopular opinion when she mentions the imagined ‘outgroup’ and says: ‘You are a great leader. Even though some people in this country don’t like to say so and don’t like to demonstrate it’. Her symbolic action provides a frame of interpretation for the actions of the leader as praiseworthy, thus uniting the group she represents (the majority) and marking the other group (the minority) as those who would misinterpret her version of reality. Invoking the public as divided between the ingroup and outgroup implicitly reminds the audience of their ‘membership in the civic collective’ (Lipari, 1999: 96). This leads to a heightened collective-identity interpretation of reality among the audience and adds to the ritualization process of political flattery. Like Regev, Pence is invoking the role of the public in ‘the American people’ and ‘back to our nation’. The difference in performance is that Regev was the only speaker, while in the US context all members of the cabinet pitched in after Pence set the bar. This is not a fundamental difference, but a variation in the ritual (Kádár, 2017) in accordance with local context. In the case of Regev, the length of the performance potentially made any attempt to re-create her performance negatively marked/non-politic/inappropriate.

The role of the addressee. For this actor, the public ritual provides the opportunity to further maintain political power. The responses of the flattered leaders demonstrate that they accept the communicative actions despite their incompatibility with democratic political norms. Analysing their responses using compliment response literature demonstrates that they signal a pleasing effect, that is, the perlocution of the flattery was achieved. Trump accepted the gestures from his cabinet members with ‘thank you’ tokens. Netanyahu thanked Regev for her performance of a positive evaluation by saying, ‘Thank you very much Miri, thank you’, but added, smiling: ‘Next time we will not accept outbursts’. Netanyahu’s response is an ‘acceptance with amendment’ utterance as it acknowledges the positive evaluation and accepts the ‘verbal gift’, but with a humorous utterance (‘Next time we will not accept outbursts’) that diminishes self-praise (Danziger, 2018). By smiling while responding, Netanyahu can be seen as keying (Goffman, 1974) his response as humoristic, signalling a jocular stance.

The role of the media. The media are ratified over-hearers; they are invited to cover the cabinet meeting and later mediate the interaction to the public. In their reports, journalists suggest a frame for interpreting the political actors’ intention (Schreiber and Kampf, 2018). The US cabinet meeting in question led The Economist (2017), for example, to compare President Trump to King Lear, the Shakespearean character who precipitates tragedy by demanding flattery from his daughters; Margolick (2017) of the New Yorker traced this event to the point where ‘Trump Learned to Love Ritualized Flattery’. The Netanyahu–Regev interaction was covered by most major news outlets in Israel. Notably missing was Israel Hayom, a free newspaper that is considered by some to be
‘Netanyahu’s mouthpiece’ (Alper, 2008). The media are seemingly divided, some reported it as ‘enthusiastic compliments’, like a Channel 7 (2018) reporter, but most reported the interaction as flattery on Regev’s part such as Walla! News (Shalev, 2018), Haaretz, Yedioth Aharonot (Aichner, 2018) and Maariv (2018). This demonstrates that the verbal actions were seen as marked, noticed and commented on, meta-pragmatically labelling the events as flattery. In his commentary about the Regev–Netanyahu event, Haaretz journalist Rogel Alper, wrote:

It is known that flattery is a means to get what you want from a powerful person. It usually thrives in the darkness, behind closed doors. [. . .] It is quite astounding to witness such overt flattery, for the simple reason that its bareness makes it clear that this government does not even pretend to be a meritocracy anymore. This decay characterizes courts of tyrants. (Alper, 2018)

Alper is offering his interpretation of Regev’s performance – ‘overt flattery’ – which she deployed in order to ‘get what [she] want[s] from a powerful person’. Her performance transgresses the democratic norm and is more suitable to ‘courts of tyrants’.

Although the event is presented within a frame through which the interaction should be interpreted, its mediation to the public gives the ritualized flattery event its public power. Regev could have praised Netanyahu privately if her intention was solely to provide positive evaluation, but she chose a cabinet meeting, fully aware that her words would be reported to the public. She drew attention to herself by breaching the protocol of the meeting and by the sheer length of her performance. Regev was doing a performance of interpersonal solidarity. The political approbation performed in a public context places it in epideictic rhetoric – a public actor and his or her actions are assigned ‘nobility’ and are being presented as a civic model. However, the media reject the performance and mark it as transgressing the norms of epideictic rhetoric. The media’s conflict over framing the performance as ‘enthusiastic compliments’ or ‘overt flattery’ represents a discursive struggle over values in society, on whether Netanyahu is deserving or not of positive evaluation, if this kind of hyperbolic language towards a leader is appropriate in a democracy, and if this transgression of political norms is merited or not (Kampf and Danziger, 2019). Their interpretation implies a detection of strategic intentions that are socially unacceptable (Danziger, 2020).

The role of the public. The public is crucial to a ritualized flattery event because not only does the audience to the performance strengthen the pleasing effect of flattery (Danziger, 2020), but it also transforms the act of solidarity into a debate over social values (Kampf and Danziger, 2019). While rituals are traditionally seen as fulfilling a function of social integration, they can also ‘legitimize the social order by naturalizing socially constructed categories and the underlying values that these categories stand for’ (Boudana, 2014: 51). The coverage of the interaction leads to an online public debate in which commenters engage in heated discussions regarding the ‘correct’ interpretation of political actions,
hence drawing epistemic boundaries around members of their interpretive community (Kampf et al., 2021). Ritualized political flattery thus demarcates the discursive boundary between those who evaluate the flatterers’ words as deserved praise and those who evaluate it as undeserved flattery. The following examples are taken from a thread in Rotter.net (2018), an Israeli political forum, dedicated to discussing the flattery event:

She should have given him full honours: His Highness; President for Life; General El khaji Doctor Bibi Netanyahu; recipient of the Victoria Cross, Military Cross, and Medal of Honour; Master of All Animals on Earth and All the Fish in the Sea, Conqueror of the British Empire in the Middle East in general and Israel specifically.

This commenter evaluated Regev’s approbation as undeserved. The text contains overt ironic marking of ‘highly exaggerated imitation of style’ that is conventionally meant to cause humiliation (Gal et al., 2020: 14). The writer suggested that Regev neglected to mention a plethora of additional markers of excellence that Netanyahu does not hold (e.g. ‘General El khaji Doctor’) or cannot possibly obtain (e.g. ‘Conqueror of the British Empire’). Alternatively, other commenters were supportive, realizing the risk of the utterances being perceived as flattery, but resisting this interpretation. For example:

[She is a] champion!!! Obviously, it will be seen as ass-kissing [lit. licking] or grovelling or anything negative but we know better.

The writer of the post is aware that Regev’s words may be interpreted as flattery by an implicit outgroup (‘Obviously, it will be seen as ass-kissing’), but the ingroup ‘know[s] better’, that this was well-deserved praise.

As this section has shown, although the overt linguistic strategies Regev used are conventional solidarity-oriented actions, most media outlets offered their metadiscursive interpretation: she was flattering Netanyahu. The ratified over-hearers noted the cues and clues that lead to their interpretation of flattery (Danziger, 2020); the response in rotter.net ironically offered exaggerated praise for Netanyahu as commentary on the hyperbolic language Regev used (‘His Highness, President for Life, General El khaji Doctor Bibi Netanyahu’). It also indicates that the writer judged Netanyahu to be undeserving of such praise. Haaretz commentator Alper mentioned the power relations and the potential benefit for Regev (‘It is known that flattery is a means to get what you want from a powerful person’) and expressed astonishment at the public context in which it took place (‘It is quite astounding to witness such overt flattery’). Her ingratiating socio-pragmatic patterns are mentioned in some reader comments to the report:
Miri, you are a person and a leader of the worst kind: a flatterer, corrupt and unworthy. (Haaretz, 2018)

Like the event in the Israeli context, the US cabinet meeting was discussed in a public forum dedicated to ‘discuss[ing] US politics’ on Reddit.com (/r/Politics). Most commenters in this thread accepted the media’s frame of interpretation of this interaction as flattery, deploying similar discursive strategies to argue their case. For example, a post mocking the hyperbolic language referenced Romeo’s speech to Juliette: ‘Shall I compare Trump to a summer’s day? Trump art more lovely and more temperate’. Some comments invoked the comparison to authoritarian regimes to mark the inappropriate context, such as ‘This is the type of meeting you expect in North Korea, not here’ and ‘This is like a Putin style propaganda meeting, but as interpreted by an idiot’. The discursive demarcation of in-group versus out-group interpretation of the event was present in the US context as well, as in ‘Tell me Trump supporters, seriously, how do you swallow this?’ Unlike the Israeli commenters in rotter.net, no comments that considered this public approbation as deserving were found, but some imagined most Americans do (‘The scariest part of this isn’t Trump, it’s the tens of millions of Americans who think this is fine, he should be praised’).

From the two cases analysed above we can now recognize the main features of ritualized flattery events: the multipericipant interaction roles, the pragmatic patterns in the performance of flattery, its evaluation by participants, and the consequent public discussion. The public witnesses the interaction as a public display of power, making mediated flattery into a symbolic action: the object of the flattery gains an emblematic status (Klatch, 1988) as the praised leader; the flatterer gains recognition, power and association with the leader (positive or negative, depending on the interpretation frame). The discourse surrounding political flattery events marks the moral boundaries regarding the value of approbation, which in epideictic rhetoric in turn marks the public norms (Beale, 1978; Hauser, 1999). Habitual public approbation of leaders lends them excessive power and places the specific leader as the ‘god’ of epideictic rituals instead of promoting civic values, as is the norm for epideictic rhetoric. The critical framing of the ritual as flattery by the media and the public implies that the leader is either underserving, the context is inappropriate, or the language in incompatible with democratic norms (Kampf and Danziger, 2019), that is, it has become an authoritarian cult of personality.

Comparing ritualized flattery between democratic and authoritarian regimes

Some current authoritarian state leaders are also associated with habitual flattery, among them, Russian President Putin (Sperling, 2016) and Turkish President Erdogan (Uysal and Schroeder, 2019). In these countries, it is perhaps easier to see the role of ritualized flattery since cults of personality are common occurrences in authoritarian regimes (Crabtree et al., 2020). In both instances, the habitual approbation rituals towards the leaders and their specific personalities are expected, since in an autocracy, the ‘god’ of the ritual is the specific leader.
A comparative analysis of a specific ritual of flattery – birthday wishes from government members towards the state leader – can provide evidence for the similarities between cults-of-personality rituals in democratic and in authoritarian regimes. Congratulatory events are known as a common context for cult-of-personality performances (e.g. Sperling, 2016) and birthday congratulations were chosen because of their prevalence in diplomatic discourse, regardless of regime type. Performed in order to publicly promote solidarity between political actors (Kampf, 2016), these solidarity-oriented actions can be labelled as flattery when they exceed discursive expectations.

A search in local media outlets for each context resulted in the press coverage of the following birthday celebrations in 2020: for President Erdogan’s 66th, President Putin’s 68th, PM Netanyahu’s 71st and President Trump’s 78th birthdays. The birthday celebrations are analysed below noting the participation roles, the discourse used, the media coverage and the representation of the public in each context. In Russia, Turkey and Israel, the birthday wishes came from political actors and members of the public and were covered in pro-government media outlets. The US context presented additional differences that will be discussed at the end of this section.

**Russia: ‘You live by the concerns of our citizens’**

Under Putin’s rule, Russia’s regime was downgraded from a ‘hybrid’ to an ‘authoritarian’ regime in 2011 in *The Economist* Democracy Index and has maintained this status ever since. Scholars trace this decline to Putin’s third term as president (Sperling, 2016), which was preceded by a rise in his cult of personality (Cassiday and Johnson, 2010). In 2020, birthday wishes for Putin from Chairman of the State Duma Volodin were reported by the official Duma website:

You selflessly serve Russia. Always close to people [. . .] You live by the concerns of our citizens, protect their rights and interests. Ensure the security and peaceful life of the country [. . .] a strong and prosperous state in which the main thing is man. https://rg.ru/2020/10/07/volodin-pozdravil-putina-s-dnem-rozhdenia.html (accessed November 2020)

Volodin’s birthday wishes displayed several discursive patterns of flattery events evoking the leader’s service to the country and the public (e.g. *You selflessly serve Russia’*), thus implicitly marking him as a civic model. An opposition news website further reported on Putin’s birthday celebrations, showing the lavish parade orchestrated by Chechnian leader Ramzan Kadyrov: men on horses spelling Putin’s name to a birds-eye view camera, and the celebrities and children of Russia wishing him happy birthday.8
Turkey: ‘O leader who carries the fate of a country’

Turkey’s declining democracy has been reported side by side with the rise of Erdogan’s cult of personality, as can be seen in two Al-Monitor (a Middle East news website) articles in 2014 by Turkish journalists. In 2016, the Washington Post published an editorial under the headline ‘A cult of personality dashes Turkey’s democratic dreams’. In 2020, an article on the Turkish duvaraR/english reported on the content of tweets with the trending hashtag ‘happy birthday man of the people’ and ‘Happy Birthday RTE’. It also conveyed the content of tweets by a high-ranking government member, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, who tweeted:

Bir ülkenin kaderini, bir Milletin duvarını, mazlumların derdini omuzlarında taşıyan lider... Biliriz ki yükünün ağırlığı, ecdadın emanetinden gelir... Liderliğin, cesaretin ve ferasetinle nice yıllara #İyikiDoğdunMilletinAdımı

O leader who carries the fate of a country, the prayers of a whole nation and the worries of the oppressed [ . . . ] We know that your burden was passed on to you from ancestors. Here’s to many years with your leadership, courage and foresight.

and Vice President Fuat Oktay, who is reported to have tweeted:

Doğumlar vardır devletin, milletin ömrüne ömür katan... Aynı yolda yürümekten şeref duyduğum liderimiz, Cumhurbaşkanımız @RT_Erdogan’a huzurdu, sağlıklı uzun ömürler diliyorum.#İyikiDoğdunMilletinAdımı

There are births that add life to a government and to a nation. I wish our president, whom we are honoured to walk side-by-side with, a happy, healthy and long life.

The leader’s service to the country and public is evoked in the Turkish context as well in the use of the hashtag ‘happy birthday man of the people’ and the use of ‘country’ and ‘nation’ by Soylu and Oktay. The latter also discursively placed himself as subordinate to the leader (‘O leader who carries the fate of a country’) and aligns himself with the public, representing its collective approbation by using an inclusive ‘we’ (‘We know that your burden was passed on to you from ancestors’). VP Oktay uses symbolically potent and hyperbolic language when he says that the leader’s birth ‘add[s] life’ to the government and the nation. The leader’s birthday is thus presented as the life force driving the nation.

Israel: ‘The leader who has taken our precious State of Israel to new heights’

Ever since The Economist began its Democracy Index, Israel has been steadily labelled a ‘flawed’ democracy due to its policies towards its Arab population. Unlike Russia and Turkey, who are considered ‘Not Free’ by Freedom House (2019), it considers Israel a
free and strong democracy. However, much like in Russia and Turkey, PM Netanyahu’s seventieth birthday prompted similar celebrations among political actors and supporters. As opposed to the Russian and Turkish media, who are not free to criticize the government, the gestures towards Netanyahu were ranked in an ‘ass-kissing chart’ by two radio hosts on 103 FM. In 2020, the pro-government Channel 20 news (‘The Voice of the People’) reported on birthday wishes from political actors and the public for Netanyahu’s seventy-first birthday. The Minister for Internal Affairs, Amir Ohana, posted a video of himself saying:

אני רוצה לאחל לראש הממשלה רק דבר אחד: שהאמת תנצח ושהצדק ייצא לאור. אני מאמין большое ...[ההיסטוריה]... של מדינת ישראל. אני מאמין большим יותר שהעמדות של רבים מחבריו ושלי לצידם של ראש הממשלה תעמוד לזכותנו ב书记 העקרית של מדינת ישראל. אני מגאה עומד לצידו של המנהל שבראשו הגיעו מדינת ישראל היקרה]

To wish the prime minister only this: that the truth will prevail, and justice will be done. I am a big believer of that and so I have no doubt that my friends and me standing by the prime minister’s side will be a credit to us in the history books [. . .] of the State of Israel. I am proud to stand by the leader who through his actions has taken our precious State of Israel to new heights in every possible field and I wish all of us many more such years. Thank you, Prime Minister. Many congratulations, health and success.

MK Ohana too mentions the leader’s service to the country (‘the leader who has taken our precious state of Israel to new heights’), providing public approbation of Netanyahu’s actions. The news report also showed the celebration of ‘the public’ that had flown a helicopter with a congratulation sign, and a car parade of supporters who sang songs of support and gave out cake and pastry (Castel, 2020).

**The US: ‘I am proud to serve under your strong leadership’**

Since its launch, The Economist Democracy Index had labelled the US a ‘full democracy’, but in 2016 downgraded it to a ‘flawed democracy’. The Economist does not attribute the change to Trump’s election, but rather argues that the election was an ‘effect of the underlying causes’ that led to the downgrade (Holodny, 2017). Trump’s birthday in June 2020 was celebrated by MAGA supports in Florida, who organized a state-wide flotilla (Associated Press, 2020). However, Trump’s birthday celebrations did not exhibit the same characteristics as Putin, Erdogan, or Netanyahu’s; very few political actors posted birthday wishes on social media; the exception was Secretary Mike Pompeo tweeting:

Happy birthday, President @realDonaldTrump! I am proud to serve under your strong leadership and wish you continued strength and fortitude as you continue to lead this great nation. https://twitter.com/secpompeo/status/1272140726537781252

Like in the Israeli context, Secretary Pompeo mentioned the leader’s service to the nation but did not explicitly positioned himself as a representative of said nation, unlike the
political actors in the authoritarian contexts. Although some comments to this tweet evaluated it as flattery (i.e. ‘You mean, #TrumpSpawnDay, you soulless, ass kissing, obsequious, bottom feeding, bootlicking, sycophantic, apple polishing stooge’), Trump’s birthday wishes or celebrations were not reported as a cult-of-personality-like ritual by the media, nor did the pro-Trump media outlets offer celebratory articles like in the contexts of Israel, Russia and Turkey.

The ritualization of flattery in political discourse

The flattery events in question displayed similar discursive patterns across contexts, namely, hyperbolic positive language from political actors and members of the public towards the leader. Political actors were found speaking on behalf of ‘the people’, presenting the leaders as civic servants, ‘selflessly’ carrying the burden of power. The political actors performed a commissive speech act – they were publicly committing themselves to supporting their leaders. Their performance was keyed (Goffman, 1974) as subordination and deference. By offering public approbation to the leader, the addressees were ‘gifting’ the leader with political power. The inclusion of the public and its celebration of the leaders’ birthdays is an instrumental effort to legitimize the political action. Whether it was the political actors or the pro-government media outlets, they supposedly demonstrated the ‘consensus’ approbation by the ‘people’ towards the leader, thus masking the abuse of power. The major difference in these cases was the critical meta-labelling of the action as flattery by the media. Unlike in Russia and Turkey, the media in Israel and the US were free to present the antidemocratic discourse as transcending the political norm (i.e. as flattery) and offered the public an interpretation frame that led to an online civic deliberation about the place of flattery in democratic discourse.

The line between cunning flattery and strategic flattery (Kapust, 2018) is blurred in these cases; are political actors implicitly obligated to perform flattery to survive in their political systems? Or are they intentional actors who exploit the political order in a non-detrimental way? While the intention of the flatterers remains inaccessible, according to Kapust (2018), leaders with too much power are feared and therefore invite opinion conformity in the form of flattery at the expense of potentially dangerous yet necessary challenges. Moreover, ritualization is a complex method of social control, ‘it is one of several ways of reproducing and manipulating the basic cultural order of a society as it is experienced by, embodied in, and reproduced by persons’ (Bell, 1992: 180). By consistently accepting public approbation rituals and rewarding flatterers, leaders in democracies effectively promote authoritarian cults of personality that undemocratically lend both addressors and addressees political power at the expense of the public.

Conclusion

This paper set out to describe the discursive patterns of ritualized flattery and its incompatibility with democratic values and processes. Analysis demonstrated a multiparticipant interaction where the addressor ‘gifts’ the addressee with political power by offering
public approbation. The ratified overhearers, the media and the public, witness the interaction, thus giving the interaction its ritualistic status. While ritualized flattery is expected in autocracies, in democracies the ratified overhearers label the approbation as flattery, that is, as transgressing the political norm. Ritualized political flattery is therefore a socially coded norm violation in democratic political discourse. Socially coded public approbation, that is, epideictic rhetoric, is manipulatively harnessed towards legitimizing the leader’s role by supposedly representing ‘the people’, similar to cults of personality. Publicly and habitually assigning nobility to the leader is replacing the ‘god’ of democratic rituals – the public – with the ‘god’ of autocracies – the specific leader.

The line between acceptable (positively marked) approbation and unacceptable (over-polite) flattery in everyday discourse is crossed when a participant in an interaction evaluates the approbation as instrumental (Danziger, 2020). In political discourse, where all interaction is assumed to be strategic (Wilson, 2002), the transgression of the norm is crossed elsewhere. What makes public approbation in political discourse unacceptable is the ritualization of the encouraged, politically worthwhile, face-pleasing approbation of the leader. This does not mean that approbation is inappropriate in political discourse. Like everyday flattery, non-ritualized political approbation holds the potential to establish, advance, or maintain solidarity between political actors (Danziger, 2020); however, the existence of ritualized flattery towards the leader is antidemocratic – or an authoritarian cult of personality.

Required flattery subverts the democratic principles of deliberative decision-making and accountability. Leaders who surround themselves with sycophants encourage opinion- and action-conformity to whatever pleases that specific leader. Thus, the deliberative process of bringing differences of opinion or interest towards collective and impartial decision-making is undermined. Moreover, leaders who are ritualistically flattered are not held accountable for their actions, leading to overconfidence and dangerous self-importance. As can be seen in the case of Turkish President Erdogan, whose ‘birth adds life to the nation’, the association of the specific leader with the survival of the nation can lead to undemocratic measures to prolong the leader’s role.

To conclude, a recurrence of ritualized flattery in democracies may be a discursive indication portending potential harm to democratic processes. A future study can further develop this point by using a richer corpus. This paper does not claim that Israel or the US are undemocratic as a whole; far from it, both are well-established democracies that promote liberal values. However, identifying undemocratic discursive patterns can promote countermeasures wherein the public itself holds its leaders accountable for their actions by not giving electoral power to those leaders who practice it.

Acknowledgements
I thank Zohar Kampf for his guidance, and Olga Pasitselska and Shahar Berger for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/13/turkish-democracy-cant-die-because-it-never-lived/; https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putin-secures-constitutional-changes-allowing-him-to-rule-until-2036-what-this-means-for-russia-141103 (accessed December 2020).
2. Both countries are considered authoritarian and not free by Freedom House and The Economist Democracy Index: https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores; https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/22/global-democracy-has-another-bad-year (accessed 14 November 2020).
3. The original post: https://www.facebook.com/may.golan.7 (accessed 16 November 2020). The satiric skit on Gav Ha’uma: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8rDSWz90hs (accessed 01 August 2020).
4. A search for the word chain ‘like a king in India Miri Regev Netanyahu’ from 21 January to 28 January 2018 in the news database http://digger.ifat.com (accessed November 2020).
5. For the original footage see: https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.5748693 (accessed 01 August 2020).
6. Addressors may very well be sincere, regardless of how hyperbolic their words are. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.
7. https://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/6gtxfo/donald_trump_just_held_the_weirdest_cabinet/ (accessed November 2020).
8. https://tvrain.ru/teleshow/vechernee_shou/putin-517305/ (accessed December 2020).
9. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/turkey-personality-cult-war-erdogan-gulen.html; https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/gursel-turkey-social-peace-erdogan-cult-polarization-akp.html (accessed December 2020).
10. The English translation is retrieved from the original web page https://www.duvarenglish.com/domestic/2020/02/27/turkeys-social-media-celebrates-erdogan-birthday-he-thanks-intwitter-video (accessed November 2020).
11. https://103fm.maariv.co.il/programs/media.aspx?ZrqvnVq=HKHLFJ&c41t4nzVQ=FH (accessed December 2020).
12. I thank Christian Baden for this observation.

References

Aichner I (2018) Regev’s flattery spectacle. Yediot Aharonot, 22 January, in print.
Alexander JC (2011) Performance and Power. Cambridge: Polity.
Alper R (2008) A newspaper? A bibi-paper. Maariv, 16 May. Available at: https://www.makor-rishon.co.il/nrg/online/1/ART1/733/583.html (accessed 14 December 2020).
Alper R (2018) The ass-kissing rituals towards Netanyahu are aggravating. Haaretz, 11 October. Available at: https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/tv-review/1.6548143?utm_source=App_Share&utm_medium=iOS_Native (accessed August 2020).
Amano S (2020) Why did the Likud become a party of Oren Hazans? Ynet, 25 October. Available at: https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/HkXabTMOP (accessed 25 November 2020).
Associated Press (2020) Floridians mark Trump’s birthday with flotillas, caravans. Los Angeles Times, 14 June. Available at: https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-06-14/floridians-mark-trumps-birthday-with-flotillas-caravans (accessed 26 November 2020).
Beale WH (1978) Rhetorical performative discourse: A new theory of epideictic. Philosophy & Rhetoric 11(4): 221–246.
Bell C (1992) Ritual Theory. Ritual Practice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Bennett WL (1980) Myth, ritual, and political control. Journal of Communication 30(4): 166–179.
Blum-Kulka S and Weizman E (2003) Misunderstandings in political interviews. In: House J, Kasper G and Ross S (eds) Misunderstanding in Social Life: Discourse Approaches to Problematic Talk. New York, NY: Routledge, pp.127–128.
Boudana S (2014) Shaming rituals in the age of global media: How DSK’s perp walk generated estrangement. European Journal of Communication 29(1): 50–67.
Caffi C and Janney RW (1994) Toward a pragmatics of emotive communication. Journal of Pragmatics 22(3–4): 325–373.
Carey J (1989) Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society. New York, NY: Routledge.
Caryl C (2017) We are living in a golden age of flattery. The Washington Post, 28 September. Available at: https://www.denverpost.com/2017/09/28/we-are-living-in-a-golden-age-of-flattery/ (accessed 1 August 2020).
Cassiday JA and Johnson ED (2010) Putin, Putiniana and the question of a post-Soviet cult of personality. Slavonic and East European Review 88(4): 681–707.
Castel M (2020) Parades, cake and even a helicopter: This is how Netanyahu supporters celebrated his birthday. Channel 20, 22 October. Available at: https://www.20il.co.il/שiriyor-MapView?Blend=0&rc=0&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIgkykXu222QIV4jXfQ5C5oegEADBwEAYASAAEiw.AE& (accessed 21 November 2020).
Catiglione B (1975 [1928]) Book of the Courtier. London: JM Dent.
Chan E and Sengupta J (2010) Insincere flattery actually works: A dual attitudes perspective. Journal of Marketing Research 47(1): 122–133.
Channel 7 (2018) Regev to Netanyahu: You were received like a king in India. 21 January. Available at: https://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/364352 (accessed 1 August 2020).
Cohen EA (2018) Team of sycophants. The Atlantic, 14 March. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/dirty-work-trump-administration/555617/ (accessed 23 December 2020)
Crabtree C, Kern HL and Siegel DA (2020) Cults of personality, preference falsification, and the dictator’s dilemma. Journal of Theoretical Politics 32(3): 409–434.
Danziger R (2018) Compliments and compliment responses in Israeli Hebrew: Hebrew University in Jerusalem students in interaction. Journal of Pragmatics 124: 73–87.
Danziger R (2020) The pragmatics of flattery: The strategic use of solidarity-oriented actions. Journal of Pragmatics 170: 413–425.
Freedom House (2019) Expanding freedom and democracy. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org (accessed 15 November 2020).
Gal N, Kampf Z and Shifman L (2020) SRSLY?? A typology of online ironic markers. Information, Communication & Society. Epub ahead of print 7 September 2020. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2020.1814380.
Goffman E (1967) Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
Goffman E (1974) Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
Goffman E (1981) Forms of Talk. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Haaretz (2018) Miri Regev interrupted a cabinet meeting: Netanyahu, you are a great leader. 21 January. Available at: https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.5748693 (accessed 16 November 2020).
Hason N (2019) Erdan supports and Steinitz flatters: This is how Likud officials are preparing for the primaries. 4 February. Available at: https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/premium-MAGAZINE-1.6901381?utm_source=App_Share&utm_medium=iOS_Native (accessed 17 November 2020).

Hauser GA (1999) Aristotle on epideictic: The formation of public morality. Rhetoric Society Quarterly 29(1): 5–23.

Holodny E (2017) The US has been downgraded to a ‘flawed’ democracy’. Business Insider, 25 January. Available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/economist-intelligence-unit-downgrades-united-states-to-flawed-democracy-2017-1 (accessed November 2020).

Jones EE (1964) Ingratiation: A Social Psychological Analysis. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Kádár DZ (2017) Politeness, Impoliteness and Ritual. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kampf Z (2013) Mediated Performatives. In: Verschueren J and Östman J (eds) Handbook of Pragmatics. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp.1–24.

Kampf Z (2016) All the best! Performing solidarity in political discourse. Journal of Pragmatics 93: 47–60.

Kampf Z, Chudy D, Danziger R, et al. (2021) “Wait with falling in love”: Discursive evaluation of amicable messages conveyed by opponents. Journal of Language and Social Psychology 40(2): 188–213.

Kampf Z and Danziger R (2019) ‘You dribble faster than Messi and jump higher than Jordan’: The art of complimenting and praising in political discourse. Journal of Politeness Research 15(1): 1–23.

Kampf Z and Löwenheim N (2012) Rituals of apology in the global arena. Security Dialogue 43(1): 43–60.

Kapust DJ (2018) Flattery and the History of Political Thought: That Glib and Oily Art. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kertzer DI (1988) Ritual, Politics, and Power. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Klatch RE (1988) Of meanings and masters: Political symbolism and symbolic action. Polity 21(1): 137–154.

Levinson SC (1979) Activity types and language. Linguistics 17: 365–399.

Levinson SC (1988) Putting linguistics on a proper footing: Explorations in Goffman’s concepts of participation. In: Drew P and Wootton A (eds) Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction Order. Oxford: Polity Press, pp.161–227.

Lipari L (1999) Polling as ritual. Journal of Communication 49(1): 83–102.

Locher MA and Watts RJ (2005) Politeness theory and relational work. Journal of Politeness Research 1(1): 9–33.

Maariv (2018) Regev to Netanyahu: ‘You are a great leader’: The Culture Minister’s flattery speech. 22 January, in print.

Machiavelli N (2005) The Prince. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Margolick D (2017) Where Trump learned to love ritualized flattery. The New Yorker, 13 June. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/where-trump-learned-to-love-ritualized-flattery (accessed 17 November 2020).

Marvin C (1994) Fresh blood, public meat: Rituals of totem regeneration in the 1992 presidential race. Communication Research 21: 264–292.

Merica D (2017) World leaders have a go-to tactic with Trump: Flattery, and lots of it. CNN, 4 May. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/04/politics/trump-foreign-leaders-flattery/ (accessed 1 August 2020).

Miller ZJ (2017) Japan’s prime minister showed the way to President Trump’s heart: Flattery. Time, 10 February. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/04/politics/trump-foreign-leaders-flattery/ (accessed 1 August 2020).
O’Shea P and Maslow S (2020) ‘Making the alliance even greater’: (Mis-)managing U.S.–Japan relations in the age of Trump. *Asian Security*. Epub ahead of print 5 November 2020. DOI: 10.1080/14799855.2020.1838486.

Park SH, Westphal JD and Stern I (2011) Set up for a fall: The insidious effects of flattery and opinion conformity toward corporate leaders. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 56(2): 257–302.

Ron O, Kremnitzer M and Shany Y (2020) *The Israeli Democracy Report: Democracies in Crisis*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute. (in Hebrew).

Rotter.net (2018) Miri Regev in a cabinet meeting: Netanyahu, you are a great leader. Available at: https://rotter.net/forum/scoops1/449072.shtml?utm_source=rotter.net&utm_medium=newsticker#1 (accessed 20 May 2021).

Schreiber M and Kampf Z (2021) Intention work: The scope of journalistic interpretation of political speech acts. *Journalism* 22(3): 616–633

Shalev T (2018) Regev used the cabinet meeting to flatter Netanyahu; ‘You made us proud’, *Walla*! 21 January. Available at: https://news.walla.co.il/item/3128897 (accessed 2 August 2020).

Spencer-Oatey H (2007) Theories of identity and the analysis of face. *Journal of Pragmatics* 29(4): 639–656.

Sperling V (2016) Putin’s macho personality cult. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49(1): 13–23.

The Economist (2017) Donald Trumps’ need for flattery is trashing reputation, 17 June. Available at: https://www.economist.com/united-states/2017/06/17/donald-trumps-need-for-flattery-is-trashing-reputations (accessed 15 November 2020).

Thompson JB (2000). *Political Scandal*. Cambridge: Polity.

Turner V (1982) *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York, NY: PAJ Publications.

Uysal N and Schroeder J (2019) Turkey’s Twitter public diplomacy: Towards a ‘new’ cult of personality. *Public Relations Review* 45(5): 101837.

Verter Y (2019) This is how a Likud backbencher got Netanyahu to appoint him Justice Minister. *Haaretz*, 6 June. Available at: https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-picked-a-toady-to-do-his-bidding-in-the-justice-ministry-1.7336893 (accessed 14 November 2020).

Vonk R (2002) Self-serving interpretations of flattery: Why ingratiations works. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82(4): 515–526.

Wilson J (2002) Political discourse. In: Schiffrin D, Tannen D and Hamilton H (eds) *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp.398–416.

Wodak R (2009) *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wodak R, Culpeper J and Semino E (2021) Shameless normalisation of impoliteness: Berlusconi’s and Trump’s press conferences. *Discourse & Society* 32(3): 369–393.

**Author biography**

Roni Danziger is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her PhD dissertation focuses on the strategic use of positive language in interaction across social contexts. Her areas of interest include socio-pragmatics and political discourse. Her most recent publications have appeared in *Journal of Pragmatics, Journal of Politeness Research, intercultural Pragmatics, Journal of Language and Social Psychology and Contrastive Pragmatics*. 