

## **A corpus-driven study of the frame *I want to* + Verb in U.S. Presidential speeches (1993-2010)**

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The aim of the paper is to identify and analyze the communicative functions of recurrent patterns containing the marker of speaker volition *I want* complemented by *to*-infinitive verbs in U.S. Presidential speeches delivered by B. Clinton, G.W. Bush and B. Obama in the 1993-2010 period from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. Frequency data indicate that the construction *I want to* + Verb is one of the most common among the multi-word units in their corpora. In our investigation we have explored the variability of the component elements of the frame and compared the data emerging from U.S. Presidential corpora with those retrieved from general reference corpora of English, i.e. the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The results indicate a significant higher frequency of this construction in the U.S. Presidential Corpus with respect to the various subsections of the reference corpora. This fact is subsequently related to the key roles of the frame in indexing a high degree of personal involvement on the part of the speaker and providing facilitative sign-posting to mark discourse organization. Its remarkable frequency and fixity, together with its relevant functions, are therefore posited as evidence of its centrality in the construction and reception of U.S. Presidential communication.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 delineates some major issues which provide the theoretical background for the topic. In particular, it describes the most important characteristics of a corpus-driven approach to the study of phraseology and the types of Multi-Word Units (MWUs) which it can derive, among which is the one investigated in this paper. It further deals with the modal dimension of the combination *WANT to* and summarizes the results of a study of this sequence in G. W. Bush's Presidential addresses during his first term of service. Section 2 describes the corpora and methodological procedure. Finally, Section 3 deals with the analysis discussing some of the most interesting patterns in terms of their main functions.

### 1 *Theoretical background*

In this section we start by providing a brief survey of the main methodologies of linguistic investigation in the field of phraseology and then concentrate on the corpus-driven approach which informs our subsequent analysis (Section 2.2). We then identify two models of MWUs commonly employed in the relevant literature and provide the rationale for our choice to focus on the sequence *I want to* + Verb. The section also delineates the arguments in favour of a modal interpretation of the construction WANT *to*, especially in its association with the first person singular pronoun which makes it a prototypical expression of speaker volition. Finally, we conclude by summarizing the key points of a previous study on the frequency and main functions of some expressions of speaker volition, including *I want to*, in G. W. Bush's Presidential addresses.

#### 1.1

##### *Approaches to the study of phraseology*

In their recent survey of the field of phraseology Granger and Paquot (2008) identify two main approaches which have dominated the scene: the traditional and the corpus-driven. Both focus on the study of MWUs, i.e. strings of more than one word, in language use. However, while the first approach defines the units of analysis strictly on the basis of linguistic criteria, the second makes use of inductive, frequency-based procedures. In the traditional approach (e.g. Cowie 1998), idioms are the prototypical MWU, whose semantic non-compositionality is generally considered as their defining feature. Other non-idiomatic MWUs are seen to operate at or below the level of the sentence, as is the case of the restricted collocation *heavy rain*, or as pragmatically autonomous utterances, characterized by illocutions that are routinely employed in communication (e.g. greetings). The corpus approach, on the other hand, prioritizes identification techniques of MWUs either in terms of frequently repeated continuous sequences (e.g. n-grams or phrase-grams) or as statistically significant lexical and grammatical associations (i.e. collocations and colligations). The criterion of semantic non-compositionality is thus done away with in their identification process, since frequency and statistical measures are considered reliable evidence of their importance in real language use. A more detailed description of the corpus-driven methodology and a working definition of MWUs according to this approach is delineated in the following sections.

1.2

*The corpus-driven approach*

The corpus-driven approach to linguistic investigation is expounded by Tognini-Bonelli (2001: 84-92) who underlines its empirical, inductive nature. In her own words, it “aims to derive linguistic categories systematically from the recurrent patterns and the frequency distributions that emerge from language in context” (Ibid.: 87). Corpora therefore provide principled collections of text produced for real communicative purposes which are investigated by means of appropriate techniques in order to highlight recurrent linguistic patterns and their frequency distribution. The corpus-driven researcher takes such evidence as her/his starting point for the analysis. In this sense, the corpus-driven approach is different from the corpus-based since the last one is grounded on pre-existing theories of language. In the latter approach, data retrieved from corpora are selected and used “to support linguistic argument or to validate a theoretical statement” (Ibid.: 84). On the contrary, in the corpus-driven approach the formulation of theoretical statements is the result of repeated cycles of data observations, specification of hypotheses and their verification, and the final expression of generalisations which are empirically testable (Ibid.: 2).

For Biber (2009: 278) the corpus-driven approach is actually an umbrella term covering a wide range of methodologies which share the common goal of inductively discovering new linguistic constructs from corpora. However, in his paper he notices how even one of the most celebrated corpus-driven study, i.e. Hunston and Francis’s pattern grammar of English (Hunston and Francis 2000), actually incorporates some corpus-based elements. As a matter of fact, the two British researchers make use of part-of-speech categories which are based on traditional language descriptions of language. To give an example, the pattern ***under* N** combines the specific word *under* with the syntactic category of nouns. The researchers’ investigation of the pattern in the Bank of English yielded a long list of associations of the preposition with particular nouns which have been divided into 15 semantic classes (Francis *et al.* 1998: 329-334). One of their main discoveries is indeed the connection of patterns and meaning to the point that “particular patterns will tend to be associated with lexical items that have particular meanings” (Hunston and Francis 2000: 83). For example, one of the semantic classes of the ***under* N** pattern they have identified is the ‘attack’ group which includes a series of nouns (*assault, attack, siege, threat, etc.*) that refer to a situation in which an entity (usually a person or something made up of or related to people such as governments or cultures) is in peril. It is this further level of semantic unity which, according to Gries’s (2008: 6)

definition of key criteria for the identification of phraseologies, makes patterns a valid object of study in this area of investigation.

On the other hand Biber's approach to the study of MWUs is radically corpus-driven and, following this line of argument, he specifies three general characteristics of his approach: it is based on the analysis of actual word forms (as opposed to lemmas); it only considers sequences of word forms (discarding their syntactic status); it finally focuses on their frequent, recurrent combinations. Frequency, together with distribution in more than five different texts, is therefore paramount in order to identify MWUs, but the result is not a collection of random sequences devoid of linguistic value. As we will see in the next section, the theoretical status of these strings is further corroborated by their interpretation in both structural and functional terms (Biber *et al.* 2004: 399-400).

The degree of application of the corpus-driven approach is therefore variable and a matter of the researchers' interests and goals as far as consideration of pre-defined categories is concerned. There is however a general tendency to minimize pre-existing theoretical assumptions, though variation in the approach yields various typologies of constructs, two of which are described in Section 1.3.

### 1.3

#### *Two models of Multi-Word Units*

This section briefly illustrates two models of MWUs identified by researchers in the field of corpus-driven phraseology. Here we will only deal with continuous strings of words, either considered as uninterrupted or containing one free slot. We will then provide the rationale for our decision to study the string *I want to* + Verb.

The most common MWU model is variously known as n-gram (e.g. Stubbs 2007), chain (e.g. Stubbs and Bart 2003), lexical bundle (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999: 987-1024) or word cluster (e.g. Carter and McCarthy 2006: 828-837). This is a recurrent, uninterrupted sequence of word forms. The most commonly studied format includes four word forms (e.g. Biber *et al.* 2004; Biber and Barbieri 2007; Hyland 2008), as it is usually more frequent than longer strings and, at the same time, has a wider assortment of readily recognizable functions than shorter sequences. The studies by Biber *et al.* (2004) and Biber and Barbieri (2007) are particularly important as they identify three main functions, i.e. stance, discourse organization and reference. They also show that MWUs are a means of differentiation between spoken and written university registers. In particular, Biber and

Barbieri (2007: 273, 279) prove that stance MWUs are the most frequent in the oral registers (e.g. classroom teaching and class management), while referential bundles are more common in the written ones (e.g. institutional writing and textbooks). From a theoretical point of view, the central discovery of these studies is that these strings, which at first sight may be dismissed as semantically and syntactically incomplete, are characterized by pragmatic integrity, i.e. they demonstrate a considerable degree of functional specialization which may be the main reason behind their remarkable frequency in language use. For example, in their analysis of CANCODE, a 5-million-word spoken corpus, O’Keeffe *et al.* (2007: 70-75) mention a series of pragmatic categories such as discourse marking, hedging, the preservation of face and the expression of politeness which are relevant signals of how the interaction between the interlocutors of a conversation in a given context is unfolding.

The notion of pragmatic integrity is extended by O’Keeffe *et al.* (2007: 71) to the second model of MWUs which we are going to present. This is known as phrase-frame (e.g. Stubbs 2007: 90-91) and consists of a continuous string of word forms with one variable slot. Renouf and Sinclair’s (1991) notion of ‘collocational framework’ (e.g. *a \* of*, in which the empty slot indicated by the asterisk is typically filled in by words such as *lot, couple, number, series, group*, etc.), for example, is a special type of phrase-frame. While Stubbs (2007: 90) underlines their greater flexibility with respect to n-grams, for O’Keeffe *et al.* (2007: 71) frames add an element of completeness. They illustrate this point by means of the 3-gram *a bit of* which typically plays the pragmatic role of downtoner, but is also part of the larger frame *a bit of \**, usually completed by nouns such as *mess, problem, nuisance* which convey a negative evaluation of a situation (Ibid.: 71). This particular frame, therefore, seems to contribute considerably to conveying speaker stance and does so to a larger extent than the initial 3-gram seems to indicate. It could be formalized as *a bit of + Noun*, in which the members of the part-of-speech category could be further pragmatically delimited by negative semantic prosody (Louw 1993; Sinclair 1991; 1996; 1998). It is in an attempt to capture these larger stretches of meaning (together with their potential semantic preferences and prosodies) that we have decided to group the various 4-grams containing, for example, the sequences *I want to thank, I want to say, I want to welcome*, etc. into the phrase-frame *I want to \** from our corpus of U.S. Presidential speeches. Furthermore, on the basis of the obvious results which we have obtained for the empty slot, we have decided to modify the frame formalization by delimiting the part-of-speech category for the empty slot to verbs only, as shown in the title of the paper. However, the decision to focalize on this particular frame is entirely

consistent with a corpus-driven approach and is fully delineated in Section 2.2.

#### 1.4

##### *The modal dimension of WANT to*

In this section we will provide a brief survey of the literature on WANT *to* in order to set the ground for a fuller comprehension of its role and importance in the context of U.S. Presidential discourse.

General reference grammars of English (e.g. Quirk *et al.* 1985, Biber *et al.* 1999) consider the verb WANT as behaving as any other main lexical verb on the basis of morphological and syntactic criteria. As a matter of fact, it can be inflected for the third person singular and the past tense, and it can be followed by a direct object or a *to*-infinitive clause. In this sense it is in sharp contrast with central modals such as *can* or *must*. However, some researchers (e.g. Krug 2000; Verplaetse 2003) have put forward the thesis that WANT *to* is developing features which are characteristic of modal verb. To support his claim, Krug (2000: 152-154) underlines the phenomenon of phonological reduction from WANT *to* to *wanna*, which accounts for over 20% of contiguous *want to* in the spoken part of the British National Corpus as a first indication of grammaticalization, a general, gradual process which all central modals have gone through. He further adds its remarkably rapid increase in discourse frequency since the mid eighteenth century, which he interprets as another piece of evidence of its growing grammaticalization (Ibid: 131-134). Finally he signals its semantic extension from volition to mild obligation as is the case in Ex. 1 from COCA (Davies 2008):

Ex. 1 "You do surprise me," she said. Ria felt irritated by this response.  
 "Why, Mam? You know I love him, and he loves me. What else would we do but get married?" "Oh, certainly, certainly... he's just so good-looking," her mother said. [...] "You **want to** be careful of him, Ria," she said.

The example is taken from a novel published in 1999 where the string WANT *to* functions as a warning, since it would not be possible for Ria's mother to inform her daughter about her desires, which actually run counter to her own. This phenomenon is considered by Leech *et al.* (2009: 199) as an additional proof of its modalization since it presents a defective tense system. As a matter of fact, sentences characterized by deontic WANT *to* cannot be turned into the past tense without losing their modal meaning. Leech *et al.* (Ibid.: 201) conclude that most of the instances of the construction WANT *to* are at the initial stage of the grammaticalization process, but when used in a deontic meaning, they are fully modal.

A further argument in favour of a modal understanding of the combination WANT *to* is put forward by Bybee (1995: 503-517) who indicates that the past tense is often used in a present context to express tentativeness and therefore signal politeness and respect, as for example in *I wanted to ask you if you could help me*. This is also possible with central modals such as *can/could* and *will/would*, but not with other verbs.

Another fundamental piece of evidence is provided by Verplaetse (2003) in her analysis of verbal complementation with WANT *to*. The patterns she uncovers in her study of concordances from the spoken component of the BNC demonstrate the fundamentally private character of the construction that warrants its inclusion in the field of modal meaning. In her study she notices how the combination with the first person singular subject is the most frequent and is typically used in declarative structures as a straightforward expression of personal volition, while associations with the second person subject favour syntactic or semantic structures encoding speaker's uncertainty. These two key patterns foreground speaker stance and as such are central in a definition of volition as a modal category.

The modal dimension of the string WANT *to*, especially when it is associated with the first person singular, is therefore of particular interest for understanding its remarkable frequency and functional relevance in the context of public monologic speeches which are delivered by the U.S. Presidents.

### 1.5

#### *Speaker volition in G. W. Bush's Presidential addresses*

Pinna (2007) provides a study of the most common exponents of speaker volition (*I want to*, *I am going to*, *I would like to* in all their written realizations) in a corpus of G.W. Bush's Presidential addresses in the 2001-2004 period. The sequence *I want to* is the most frequent of the three and its statistically significant association with the personal pronoun *you* in the context to its right indicates its importance in managing the interaction with the audience. The most recurrent complementation patterns reveal their central function as devices which are employed to manage the relationship with the audience in a type of communicative event which is essentially monologic. As a matter of fact, they contribute to build the impression of a constant dialogic interaction between the orator and his audience. The extremely frequent complementation pattern with the verb *thank*, for example, constitutes a routine formula which is strategically positioned at the beginning and end of speeches as a means to foreground the President's

face, win over and gratify the public. The complementation pattern with verbal processes, on the other hand, has the dual function of launching a topic and handle the relationship with the audience according to polite, cooperative principles (e.g. Leech 1983). Being embedded in a linguistic context which is typically characterized by in-group binding signals and solidarity markers, these patterns play an important role in the construction of a convivial atmosphere which is conducive to aligning the purposes of the interactants and thus enhance the persuasive potential of the addresses. Their contribution to persuasion could be explained with reference to the Aristotelian concept of *ethos*, which in traditional rhetoric concerns the speaker's credibility as a competent orator. This hinges on the careful construction of his/her public persona and is realized in discourse by his/her capacity to manage content and form in an appealing delivering style. In this sense, these patterns, which work in full accord with their immediate context according to specific strategic purposes, highlight the President's capacity to create a symmetric relationship with his audience. This is in line with the oratorical style of other famous political leaders of our age, as shown – for example – by Fairclough (2000), and demonstrates that it is one of the fundamental abilities needed by a competent leader in post-modern, democratic societies.

## *2 Corpora and methodology*

In this section the general characteristics of the corpora which have been used for the analysis are briefly described before proceeding to delineate the corpus-driven analytical procedure which has been followed.

### *2.1 Corpora*

The present study has been based on three collections of speeches delivered by the incumbent and the two previous U.S. Presidents covering a seventeen-year-long time span. The corpora were compiled by downloading their official addresses and remarks from the official White House website during their period in office (<http://www.whitehouse.gov>). The general details of each collection are the following:

- B. Clinton (1993-2000); 7,036,941 tokens; 39,065 types.
- G.W. Bush (2001-2008); 5,470,488 tokens; 31,539 types.



- B. Obama (2009-2010); 1,529,895 tokens; 21,619 types.

Data retrieved from the U.S. Presidential corpus were then compared with those from a reference corpora of general American and British English available on-line:

- COCA (1990-2009); 402,322,551 tokens (Davies 2008-).
- BNC (1960/75-1991); 96,986,707 tokens (Davies 2004-).

## 2.2 *Methodology and analytical procedure*

We started our analysis following a radical corpus-driven approach as described in Biber (2009: 281) in order to identify the n-grams at work in the U.S. Presidential corpus described in Sect. 2.1. We therefore decided to apply the same constraints: a cut-off point of at least 10 occurrences per million words in each collection; focus on the identification of 3- and 4-grams. Frequency lists of n-grams were automatically retrieved from the corpus by using the clusters function in the WordList facility of WordSmith 3.0, a suite of computer programmes through which corpora can be manipulated to extract analyzable information (Scott 1996).

The data demonstrate that the 3-gram *I want to* is the most frequent in both Clinton's and Bush's collections of speeches, while it is the third most frequent in Obama's. The particular importance of this marker of speaker volition is further revealed by a search for 4-grams, which yielded the sequence *I want to thank* as the most frequent in both Clinton's and Bush's corpora and one of the most frequent (actually the 11<sup>th</sup> in the list) in Obama's. Table 1 illustrates the most significant findings with respect to these two sequences.

Table 1. Occurrences of the sequences *I want to* and *I want to thank* in the U.S. Presidential Corpus

U.S. Presidential collections	3-gram <i>I want to</i>		4-gram <i>I want to thank</i>	
	Raw freq.	%*	Raw freq.	%*
Clinton	9319	0.13%	6527	0.09%
Bush	9667	0.17%	7028	0.13%
Obama	1419	0.09%	355	0.02%

\*Percentage of *I want to* and *I want to thank* with respect to 3-gram and 4-gram tokens

This empirical method is totally consistent with the corpus-driven approach described by Tognini-Bonelli (2001) and shows the relevance of

the strings *I want to* and *I want to thank* in the three collections of speeches. The relatively high frequency of other 4-grams based on the sequence *I want to* followed by a verb then prompted us to refine our research by concentrating on the frame *I want to* + Verb of which we have investigated the internal degree of variability and the functions it performs in Presidential discourse. In methodological terms, we have therefore introduced a corpus-based component, firstly by assuming the existence of part-of-speech categories, especially the class of verbs, and secondly by taking for granted the syntactic relationship between verbs and the preceding word forms, in particular the infinitive marker *to* (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999: 89). As specified in Section 1.3, frames have the potential to reveal units of meaning characterized by pragmatic integrity which could otherwise go undetected in the study of individual n-grams. The rest of the paper is devoted to the analysis of this frame first of all by comparing the quantitative information retrieved from the Presidential corpus with that obtained by the reference corpora, then by identifying and discussing its most common functions in U.S. Presidential speeches.

### 3 Analysis

This section deals with the two objectives of our research study. We start with a comparison of the data yielded by the corpora described above in order to provide a reliable measure of the importance of the frame under investigation in Presidential discourse. We then proceed to identify the most common verbs occupying the fourth slot of the frame. Finally, we identify and discuss the most important functions of these patterns in U.S. Presidential speeches.

#### 3.1

##### *Quantitative analysis: a comparison of data between corpora*

A clearer appreciation in quantitative terms of the role played by the frame *I want to* + Verb in U.S. Presidential speeches is offered in Table 2 which compares the frequency data normalized per million words from the Presidential corpus with those from three subsections of COCA.

Table 2. Occurrences per million words of the frame *I want to + Verb*

<b>Presidents</b>	Clinton 1342.38	Bush 1736.21	Obama 933.55
<b>COCA</b>	Spoken 233.45	News 55.10	Academic 19.23

As the table shows, the frame is considerably more common in the spoken component of the reference corpora, a clear indication of its preferred usage in oral contexts. It is however immediately evident that the occurrences of the frame are a lot more frequent in the Presidential corpus. Furthermore, the difference between the two sets of data is extremely statistically significant as demonstrated by a contingency table  $X^2$  statistical test ( $X^2 = 134.16$ , d.f. 1,  $p < 0.0001$ ). This statistic provides an objective measure of the importance of the frame in U.S. Presidential speeches, at least in terms of frequency, which is probably best explained with reference to its association with some features of the communicative situation in which it is used.

### 3.2

#### *Complementation patterns of the sequence I want to*

In order to reach a better understanding of the different uses of the frame in the Presidential corpus v. the reference corpora, we have used t-score, a statistical measure of the strength of association between words, to identify the strongest collocations between *want* and the verbs occupying the fourth slot. These results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3. Top 5 verbs in the 4th slot of the frame listed by t-score values (US Presidential speeches)

Clinton		Bush		Obama	
thank	48.6	thank	74.3	thank	17.6
say	36.9	talk	13.2	acknowledge	8.8
acknowledge	16.9	congratulate	10.2	congratulate	6.5
talk	15.9	remind	9.3	commend	4.9
tell	14.8	share	9.0	talk	4.3

By grouping the verbs in Table 3 for semantic or functional similarity, we can recognize two main classes: performative verbs (*thank, acknowledge, congratulate, commend*) and verbs of communication (*say, talk, tell, remind*). What seems to be an exception, *share*, is actually always used as a verb of communication in utterances such as *I want to share a story with you, I want to share some thoughts with you about [...]*.

Table 4. Top 5 verbs in the 4th slot of the frame listed by t-score values (Reference corpora)

COCA		BNC	
ask	40.4	know	16.5
go	38.9	go	14.6
know	35.1	see	13.6
thank	32.6	get	12.3
be	32.4	talk	11.5

The list of verbs in Table 4, on the other hand, are much more diverse, since they clearly belong to different classes: processes of cognition and perception (*know*, *see*), activity (*go*), communication (*ask*, *talk*), relation (*be*), and performativity (*thank*). A comparison between the data, therefore, points in the direction of two possible pragmatic functions of the frame in Presidential discourse which are not as evident in general English. This preliminary finding, which is further explored in Section 3.3, may substantiate the likelihood that different registers have characteristic MWUs which are employed in accordance with the specific features and goals of their communicative contexts.

### 3.3

#### *Pragmatic functions of the frame I want to + Verb in U.S. Presidential discourse*

In this section we will discuss the functions performed by the two most common classes of verbs (i.e. performative and communication verbs) which have been found to collocate with *want* within the concordance lines containing the sequence *I want to + Verb* in the U.S. Presidential corpus. We will first illustrate the functions performed by the frame when it includes performative verbs in its fourth slot and then describe those accomplished when verbs of communication are inserted in the same slot.

#### 3.3.1

##### *Pragmatic functions of the frame I want to + [performative verb]*

The performative verbs which are used in the fourth slot include those listed in Table 3 above (*thank*, *acknowledge*, *congratulate*, *commend*) as well as *welcome*, *recognize*, *introduce* and *compliment*. Clinton and Obama make extensive use of the whole range, while Bush has a clear preference for just three (*thank*, *welcome*, and *congratulate*). The most frequent of these verbs is *thank* which provides the prototype for the whole frame. The sequence *I want to thank* participates in a larger schema which includes the people who are

thanked and the reasons for doing it. This pattern can be discussed in relation to two key functions in Presidential discourse: salutation and praise. To be more precise, apart from *thank*, the performative verbs can be sorted out according to the function of the frame, so that *acknowledge*, *welcome*, *recognize*, and *introduce* participate in the salutation/welcome schema, while *congratulate*, *commend* and *compliment* contribute to the praise function. Both pragmatic functions are very important with respect to the management of the interaction with the audience and contribute to the interpersonal dimension of Presidential discourse by creating a convivial environment where the persuasive ability of the orator can be fully exerted.

The salutation formula is typically found in sections of the speech where important strategic functions are accomplished. For example, it is extremely frequent at the beginning, with the aim of contributing to the construction of a successful interaction with the audience, and at the end of speeches, where the hearers are gratified for their attendance. The following are two examples of the use of this function at the beginning and end of two Presidential speeches respectively.

Ex. 2 [Remarks by President Clinton at Democratic National Committee dinner, Los Angeles, California, November 16, 1997] Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here. I'm, first of all, delighted to see you all, and *I want to thank you for your presence here and for your support. And I want to thank you for having us in your beautiful home and your beautiful tent.* (Laughter.) [Our emphasis]

Ex. 3 [Remarks by President Clinton in telephone call concerning enterprise zones, The Oval Office, May 4, 1993] *I want to thank all of you so much for giving me a little of your time today* and for your support of this initiative. I hope you'll talk to your colleagues across the country, to the members of Congress, and again reach out across party and other lines and say this is something that will be good for America. I need your help now to pass it [...]. Thank you very, very much. [Our emphasis]

In both examples above, the formula deliberately foregrounds the Presidential persona, in that his volitional stance frames the thanking performative. In doing so the President signals that he is willing to incur a threat to his negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987: 67) which serves the purpose of ritually opening up and concluding the communicative co-operation with his audience by implicitly recognizing the value of their own time they are devoting to his speech. This 'democratic' strategy plays a role in ideally balancing the asymmetry of power: the audience may at least theoretically 'reclaim' their time, for example by leaving the place, and thus put an end to the interaction. In this way the President implicitly recognizes

that his authority, both as orator and, in general, as head of the executive, is originated in the will of the people who have entrusted him with their votes. The thanking ritual has, therefore, a deeper symbolic meaning, one in which the fundamental link between the Presidency and the people as defined in the American political system is hinted at. The fact that these frequently recurring formulae cluster at the beginnings and conclusions of speeches testifies to their importance in building and managing a viable interaction with the audience which is conducive to effective persuasion.

While the verb *thank* occurs in salutation formulae which are often addressed to the crowd present at the rally, the other performative verbs are typically used to welcome specific people who are introduced by full name and official title, as is shown by Ex. 4.

Ex. 4 [Remarks by President Obama at House Democratic Caucus Issues Conference, Virginia, February 5, 2009] *I want to acknowledge* the great Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. (Applause.) [our emphasis]

Finally, a common stylistic variation of the salutation formula, illustrated by Ex. 5, is offered by Clinton who uses a communication verb to create a periphrasis of the performative *thank*.

Ex.5 [Remarks by President Clinton to National Academy Foundation annual conference, California, July 8, 1999] *And I want to say a special word of thanks* to Reverend Jesse Jackson, who worked with [...] [our emphasis]

Not surprisingly, the praising formula expresses approval for a specific person or a group of people who are thus enlisted as supporters of Presidential initiatives. From the point of view of Leech's (1983: 135) Politeness Principle, instances of the formula can be explained with reference to the Approbation Maxim, in its positive version according to which praise of other is maximized. These utterances accomplish convivial illocutions which are aimed at fostering social comity. In the context of Presidential discourse, praise is a key strategy in the creation of consensus in that it explicitly sets forth exemplary behaviour or action to be admired and emulated, thereby placing the President among those who endorse the values which have inspired it. Often those very values are posited as inspiring the legislative agenda of the Administration and therefore the praise is fully exploited to legitimise it.

Ex. 6 [President Bush Signs Identity Theft Legislation, Washington, D.C., 4<sup>th</sup> December 2003] Nearly two years later, Michael is still fighting the effects of the fraud. The system was broken. Michael is living testimony to what I'm saying when I said the system was broken. And Congress acted. *I*

*want to thank you all for stepping up and doing the right thing here.* See, in an age when information about individuals can be found easily, sold easily, abused easily, government must act to protect individual privacy. And with this new law, we're taking action. [our emphasis]

In Ex. 6 Bush takes advantage of his praising the Congress for a bill on identity theft to claim success for his government too, by means of an inclusive first person plural pronoun (*with this new law, we're taking action*) and an explicit attribution of the inspiring principle cast as a naturalized moral truth distilled from the personal story of a member of the audience who has been made an exemplar of a cautionary tale (van Leeuwen 2008: 118), i.e. what can happen to one of us if there is a mismatch between practices and social norms.

A final example which we are going to discuss concerns the exploitation of the praising formula to promote the value of serving the nation by means of the legitimating strategy of role model authority (Ibid., 107). Interestingly this value is the moral distilled from an anecdote in which the person who is praised, basketball champion Jack Wooten, takes on the role of hero, while the praiser, the President himself, is self-represented as the goofy antagonist.

Ex. 7 [Remarks by President Obama to the 2009 men's national basketball champions, the University of North Carolina, South Portico, May 11, 2009] [...] when we played, everybody went out of their way to pass me the ball, set screens for me, let me take a shot. Tyler chose not to block my shot -- of course, I was so intimidated by him being near me that I missed it. (Laughter.) There was one exception, though. Jack Wooten -- he stole the ball from me. He blocked my shot. He fouled me once. Coach Williams had to remind him that there were a bunch of guys with guns around. (Laughter.) But just to show that there are no hard feelings -- Jack, *I want to congratulate you*. He made Phi Beta Kappa this year -- that's worth applauding. (Applause.) To achieve academic excellence as part of a national championship team is extraordinary. And I know that Jack is interested in public service, and we need more young people like him to be willing to serve our country. [our emphasis]

In Ex. 7, Leech's (1983: 135, 136) *Approbation Maxim*, used to praise Wooten, is accompanied by the *Modesty Maxim* to maximize self-dispraise of Obama. The episode becomes a story with an instructive moral from both a personal and a political point of view. On the one hand, Obama switches between the footings of player with limited skills and President who is entitled to all sorts of help on the basketball court, including the protection of armed guards. This contrast is exploited to humorous ends to create for him the appealing image of the friendly guy who likes fun and

fair-play, but is also well aware of his own limitations. On the other hand, this event symbolically stands out, as he implicitly conveys the message that the President himself is a member of the community, a man who shuns the possibility of taking advantage of the power with which he has been invested; this lack of arrogance is underlined by the self-mocking *there are no hard feelings* followed by the climactic praise. This contributes to create for him the image of a leader who is loyally serving the nation and is thus entitled to promote this value.

In conclusion, the two functions which we have discussed contribute to manage the interaction between the President and his audience and are exploited in strategies aimed at the co-construction of Presidential communication as a co-operative effort in a convivial context that can be more conducive to persuasion.

### 3.3.2

*Pragmatic functions of the frame I want to + [communication verb]*

Besides the verbs of communication in Table 3 (*say, talk, tell, remind*), the list can be enlarged with *mention, ask, remind, speak, explain, repeat, discuss, express* and *share*, which is used in the periphrases mentioned in Section 3.2. Other verbs with a communicative scope are *emphasize, point out, be clear* and *focus*. Clinton in particular, but also Obama, though to a lesser extent, use of the whole range of verbs, while Bush's choices are more limited. Though the list of verbs of communication from which Presidents can choose is quite varied, they seem to have a clear preference for the most frequent ones in general English, i.e. *talk, say, and tell*.

In our analysis we have been able to identify three clear functions: topic launchers, discourse organizers and emphasizees. These pragmatic functions are very important with respect to facilitative sign-posting in the organization of discourse and contribute effectively to message relay and reception.

Topic launchers serve the primary function of identifying a new topic which is going to be discussed. According to Biber *et al.* (2004: 392), the expression of speaker volition is backgrounded in favour of the more specialized function of announcing his/her intention to start a new topic. Ex. 8 shows one of these MWUs at work.

Ex. 8 [President Bush's Remarks in "Focus on Education with President Bush" Event, Pennsylvania, September 22, 2004] *I want to talk a little bit about how to make America and the world safer. Today we're going to emphasize education. We've got some experts up here on education. [our emphasis]*



This particular example is placed immediately after the thanking ceremony with which Presidents typically start their speeches. After having set up an agreeable dimension for communication to unfold, Bush moves on to deal with the contents of his address. What is interesting about this specific case is that the topic which is identified by means of the launching formula is not what the President is actually going to talk about, but serves the purpose of locating this particular speech in the intertextual environment of his previous discourse. Through this rather common strategy, the Administration's initiatives on education are connected to the issue of national and world security and therefore acquire a new resonance and significance.

Discourse organizers signal the relationship between the topic at hand and previous or following stretches of text. They are typically found in association with sequencing discourse markers such as *the first thing, for a start, finally*, etc. with the main function of indicating the order in which the topics are arranged but they also signal how the segments of a speech are being related. Some examples are given below to illustrate this function.

Ex. 9 [Remarks by President Obama on Space Exploration in the 21st Century, John F. Kennedy Space Center, Merritt Island, Florida, April 15, 2010] *Finally, I want to say a few words about jobs.* Suzanne pointed out to me that the last time I was here, [...]

Ex. 10 [Remarks by President Clinton on the next generation cops initiative, Alexandria Police Station Alexandria, Virginia January 14, 1999] Now, having said all that, *I want to go back to a point* Senator Biden made. Dealing with crime, now that it's down, is kind of like dealing with the economy.

While Ex. 9 shows that the topic of discussion is positioned with respect to other ones in a list, Ex. 10 illustrates an intertextual move in which the orator uses the organizing MWU to link to a topic that was dealt with earlier by a previous speaker.

Emphasizers are devices used to grab or focus the listeners' attention on a certain topic or segment of the speech that the speaker feels is important. They are characterized by the presence of verbs such as *emphasize, point out, be clear* and *focus* in the fourth slot of the frame. Ex. 11 clearly illustrates this function.

Ex. 11 [President Bush Encourages the Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind - Harlem Village Academy Charter School - New York, New York, April 24, 2007] I want to talk about schools, and I want to talk about educational excellence for every single child. And *I want to emphasize* that in my remarks, my hopes of the public school systems in every state and every community excel. That's our goal. The public school systems have provided

great opportunities for a lot of Americans. One of the great assets of the United States of America is a public school system [...].

In conclusion, the patterns of the frame *I want to* + [communication verb] have been shown to play a central role in providing efficient indications as to how a speech is structured and which specific stretches of discourse should be paid attention to. These contribute to mark the logical construction of speeches and are therefore important in conveying the message effectively and convincingly.

#### 4 Conclusion

Deliberative discourse is a fundamental test ground of popular leadership for U.S. Presidents who have to constantly demonstrate their skills in promoting their political agendas and their public personae before their real and potential electorate. Following traditional rhetoric, two crucial areas in which language can be employed to construct a persuasive framework are the delivery of logically structured discourse and the management of the interaction between the orator and his/her audience. In the first area, the speaker has to prove his/her mastery of oratory by skillfully organizing discourse. In the second area, the President has to demonstrate great ability in creating a co-operative environment for successful communication to take place.

In this study we have focused our attention on the uses of the frame *I want to* + Verb in U.S. Presidential speeches delivered by B. Clinton, G.W. Bush and B. Obama in the 1993-2010 period. By applying a corpus-driven approach, we have studied the verbs which significantly occur in the Verb slot in order to highlight recurrent combinations. Our results show that the frame can be considered a characteristic multi-word unit in our collections of U.S. Presidential speeches, a likely outcome of the embedded expression of speaker volition which foregrounds the Presidential persona and thus promotes his authoritativeness as a source of information and judgement. The sequence therefore frames in terms of speaker stance the information contained in the following words. Among the functions which our analysis has identified, two concern the management of the interaction with the audience, i.e. salutation/welcome and praise, and three deal with the organization of discourse in a logical manner so as to facilitate the listeners' decoding process.

*Note*

Antonio Pinna is the author of Sections 1, 2, 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.1. Ilaria Tortorici is the author of Section 3.3.2.

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