



**'I Don't Know the Answer to that
Question': A Corpus-assisted Discourse
Analysis of White House Press Briefings**

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Abstract

White House Press Briefings, daily meetings with the press held by the White House Press Secretary, are the main information conduit for the White House (Kumar 2007). They are considered a 'political chess game' where the Press Secretary and the press face a 'wrestling match' (Partington 2006: 16).

Our analysis is carried out on a corpus comprising all the Press Briefings across three presidencies from Clinton to Obama. The additional mark-up includes information about individual speakers and their role, allowing us to compare different discourse strategies adopted by the participants in the briefings at different points in time. This leads us to determine the extent of the differences in the patterns found as well as the nature of the variation from one participant to the next one.

Starting from a phraseological perspective (Granger and Meunier 2008), our analysis will focus on avoidance strategies enacted by the podium with the main purpose of preserving face and yet 'doing the job' (Partington 2003: 80). We will show how the cluster 'I don't know' can be exploited by various podiums, mainly in accordance with strategic communication choices made by the US administrations, highlighting differences in the podium's attitude towards the press.

Key words: White House Briefings, institutional discourse, face, key clusters

1. White House Press Briefings¹

Communication has always played a key role in politics in the United States; however this role has changed dramatically in the latter half of the 20th

century, mostly due to a significant increase in the influence exerted by the media in the US political system (Perloff 1998). Today, indeed, US politics takes place in a mass media-dominated arena, where political success largely depends on the overt struggle for the conquest of public opinion. For this reason, the US presidency invests more time and resources in communicating what is being done than in actual decision-making (Perloff 1998: 98).²

Technological innovation, with the rise of cable TV and the web, and the increasing competition between media outlets have resulted in a shortened, accelerated news cycle (Kumar 2007: 197), in which news reporting is less accurate and less issue-centred and, in contrast, more focused on personalities and scandal (Han 2001: 15). This has made it essential for the White House to respond quickly to newly arisen issues, mainly through the daily press briefings.

Press briefings are the meetings with the press held by the White House Press Secretary, through which the White House delivers official information and announcements about the President's daily schedule, explains the administration's decisions and policies, responds to criticism, provides commentary on current events, and answers the questions posed by the press (Kumar 2007: 235). Through the press briefings, the president indirectly 'appears' to the press, and what he thinks and does becomes part of the public record (Kumar 2007: xxii): every word uttered by the spokesperson, who provides the press with official responses on his behalf, becomes an official presidential comment or statement (Kumar 2007: 179-180).

Since Clinton's presidency, press briefings are not only transcribed and made available on the White House website, but also filmed and broadcast live both on television and on the Internet. The televised briefing, according to Jim Kennedy, communications director for the White House Counsel's Office during the Clinton administration, resembles a duel, where the way questions are formulated is influenced by the need to get answers that, informative or not, sound interesting or even sensational on TV (quoted in Kumar 2007: 56). Even if the briefings can be regarded as the battlefield for the press secretary, which we will refer to as the 'podium', and the White House press corps, which we will refer to as the 'press', the relationship between the press secretary and the press corps, is rather one of interdependence and cooperation. The White House cannot but benefit from an effective dissemination of presidential news, while White House correspondents need to obtain newsworthy information from the Press Office staff in order to meet their deadlines.

The main feature that makes the White House press briefings an interesting object of analysis is that they are a peculiar type of institutional talk (Partington 2003: 30), an instance of strategic discourse (Habermas 1984), in which linguistic choices consciously made by the two sets of participants – the press secretary and the press – are oriented to the achievement of certain goals associated with the institutions they represent. The two parties involved, the podium and the press, have very different interests and aims (Partington 2003: vi). The podium wishes to project his political ideas and particular view of the world, the press to test that view.

The briefing are an atypical kind of institutional interaction as professionals are involved on both sides, even if asymmetry is still in place, the podium

being the one that leads the interaction. Furthermore, the briefings are a rather informal setting, participants know each other well, and talk moves from one social register to another, determining the possible roles adopted by participants, each role carrying a set of opportunities, of strengths and weaknesses which can be exploited in the interaction (Partington 2003: 31-32). Being an informal institutional genre, briefings shift between a 'transactional language' used to convey content, a discourse oriented to reaching an understanding, and an 'interactional language' used to express and maintain social relationships, a strategic discourse oriented to gaining success (Harris 1995; Partington 2006). As we will see in the analysis, the potential of shifting roles is a constant trait of podiums across the five presidential terms, a trait that will be often exploited to accomplish the communicative goal of their respective administration.

1.1 The White House Briefing (WHoB) Corpus

Before moving on to the analysis of the use of the cluster 'I don't know', it is worth providing an overview of the WHoB corpus. The corpus contains all the Press Briefings held at the White House from the first Clinton Presidency (January 1998) to June 2011.³ Therefore, the corpus covers nearly eighteen years, three presidents (William J Clinton, George W Bush, and Barak H Obama), and five presidencies. A breakdown of the presidency sub-corpora in terms of running words can be found in Table 1 below.

Presidency	words
William J Clinton 1	4497718
William J Clinton 2	4574333
George W Bush 1	3598236
George W Bush 2	4445773
Barak H Obama 1	3140018
Total	20256078

Table 1: Number of running words per presidency

The scope and size of a specialised corpus of this kind, with 20,256,078 running words, make it a powerful tool to investigate the diachronic variation of the White House press briefings, and to compare communicative strategies enacted by the different podiums who have been in office along nearly twenty years. In order to manage the data more efficiently and to allow more accurate searches, the corpus has been annotated using XML mark-up, according to the TEI Guidelines (Sperberg-McQueen and Burnard 2007), so that specific contextual information could be retrieved during the analysis; it incorporates information about individual speakers and their roles (e.g. podiums, press, Cabinet member, Presidential staff and other guests), date of the briefing and text structure.

Two sub-corpora are smaller than the average. This is due to the fact that the duration of a briefing under the first Bush administration has been considerably reduced compared to the Clinton administrations (Kumar 2007: 220) and that the Obama's sub-corpus contains briefings up to June 2011.

2. Methodological and Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Keywords and Key Clusters

This research focuses on insights we can gain through the analysis of what Scott and Tribble (2006: 136-150) call 'clusters'. These contiguous associations of words have been labelled differently in the literature (i.e. 'phrases' (Sinclair 1996); 'lexical bundles' (Biber et al. 1999); 'formulaic language' (Schmitt 2004)) but all of them imply a lexical attraction which is a matter of convention (Renouf and Banerjee 2007) and 'give insights into important aspects of the phraseology used by writers in specific contexts' (Scott 2006: 132). What is important in the context of corpus analysis using *WordSmith Tools* (Scott 1996) is that clusters begin life as purely distributional phenomena and their repetition may be considered an indicator of its functional relevance (cf. Mahlberg 2007). Clusters contribute to the creation of meaning but only some of them have a key function in identifying pertinent communicative strategies of the institutional discourse.

In this paper we rely on the notion of 'keywords' which proved to be revealing for identifying specificity of this particular institutional discourse (cf. Cava et al. 2009). Keywords are not necessarily single lexical items but they can also be strings of words, that is key-clusters and only some of them may be considered as key-phrases i.e. units of meaning (Sinclair 1996) given by the association of its single components. As noticed (Scott 2010: 44), the metaphor of the word 'key' itself explains the mechanism of keywords which enable 'one to see something', thus, keywords work 'as signposts for discourse, ideology or argumentation' (Baker et al. 2011: 66) and represent the 'macrostructure' of a text (Phillips 1989).

Since it has often been noted that corpus-assisted discourse analysis is inherently comparative (e.g. Partington 2003, 2006), this analysis implies the retrieval of 4-word clusters for each presidential term which were compared and contrasted with 4-word clusters from the whole corpus, considered as 'reference corpus'. The approach is diachronic in that it aims at tracking changes in the modern communicative strategies (e.g. avoidance strategies) used by the podiums across the years.

2.2 'I don't know' in the Literature

The multifunctional phrase 'I don't know' has been extensively studied in the literature. In Halliday's SFG (1994), *know* is a mental verb of the cognitive type which usually 'projects' something more in a 'that-clause' and is relevant at the level of the writer/speaker's expression of stance. Similarly, in Biber's study (1999: 971), the phrase is categorized as a 'stance bundle', performing an epistemic function. The cluster is characterized by two main grammatical patterns in conversation: it is used with wh-complement clauses in post-

predicate position or it is followed by a *wh*-clause. In both approaches the cluster is considered an important device for expressing the speaker's stance and more particularly involvement (Östman 1981).

Another function performed by this cluster is explained in Tsui's (1991) pioneering work where 'I don't know' is associated to politeness and deference. As observed by McCarthy, '[s]peakers work hard to protect the face of their interlocutors, wishing to neither demean them nor restrict or coerce them' (McCarthy et al 2007: 73) so they may use indirect forms to perform speech acts, such as directives and requests in order to protect the face of their receivers. In Tsui's study of conversation 'I don't know' signals disagreement and often uncertainty but has above all a politeness function, that is to avoid negative consequences of face-threatening acts. In Schegloff's study 'I don't know' is considered a 'prefatory epistemic disclaimer' (Schegloff 1996: 62) performing different functions at different levels of discourse at the same time.

What research on this phrase has so far highlighted is that its functions go beyond the mere lack of knowledge or uncertainty becoming relevant at the interpersonal level and also at the textual level.

In our intent to discover the communicative strategies which serve ideological purposes of safeguarding the national image of the country and to influence the public audience positively we drew on the concept of ideology as provided by Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2006: 22) where they are seen as contributing to the constitution, reproduction of social relations of power and domination.

3. Analysis

Before analysing in depth the use of the cluster 'I don't know' an overview of its distribution across the five sub-corpora can help us to identify a general trend which will be further developed in the paper. Figure 1 shows the normalised frequency of the cluster uttered by the podium, normalised to one million words. From the graph it is clear that 'I don't know' is a constant feature of the language of the podium with the notable exception of the first Bush press secretary. This idiosyncrasy will be discussed and explained in the following paragraphs.

3.1 'I don't know' in the Clinton Sub-Corpus

The data in the Clinton sub-corpus presented a total of 3,501 occurrences of 'I don't know' in the first administration and 3,233 in the second presidency. In order to have more information about the usage of the cluster in this subset of data, a further collocates analysis was carried out⁴. *Check, answer, whether, specific, exactly, exact, detail, necessarily, and particular* were found to be the most frequent collocates. A first set of observations on a sample of 100 randomly selected concordances of the cluster showed a frequent number of instances where 'I don't know' was used: 1) to point out a specific area outside of the spokesperson's responsibility; 2) to introduce a countering proposition to present a different assertion as more valuable; 3) to reduce an absolute commitment or a definite answer; 4) to mention the provisional status of a

specific topic as still pending; 5) to postpone an answer to a later moment; 6) to express lack or absence of evidence.

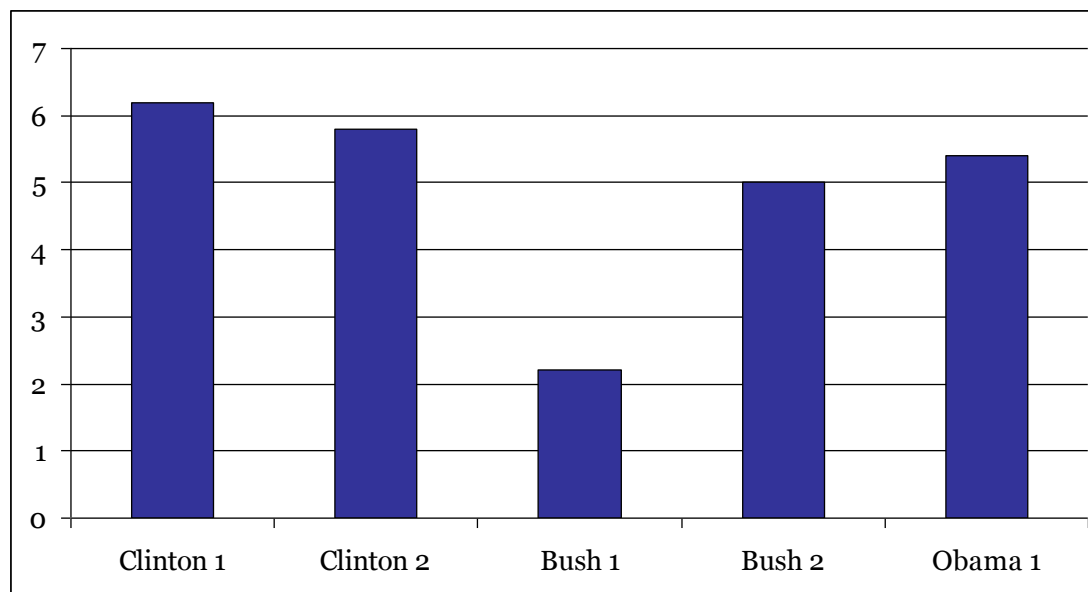


Figure 1: Per million word frequency of ‘I don’t know’ in the five presidencies

The collocates analysis also revealed the presence of the word *Lewinsky* co-occurring with the cluster in a total of 16 cases in the Clinton second term corpus. We further analysed ‘I don’t know’ when collocating with the word *Lewinsky* starting from the assumption that the mention of the Lewinsky case could offer some potentially interesting examples of interactions with the media when controversial and challenging topics were discussed.

A preliminary observation of concordances showed a high frequency of a number of lexical items which gave us more information on the ‘aboutness’ of the data. These lexical items included *correspondence*, *information*, *testimony*, *evidence*, *release* and *investigations* as the most frequent topics discussed with media. A closer reading of hits and excerpts of texts revealed that ‘I don’t know’ was mainly used to avoid a straight answer, and when seen in their wider context, the Podium’s usage of ‘I don’t know’ was found: 1) to express lack of evidential proofs; 2) to refer to an on-going investigative process; 3) to redirect media to more competent sources on a given subject; 4) to avoid predictions; 5) to express lack of competence on specific information.

The examples below show in more detail how ‘I don’t know’ was used by the Podium in the second term of Clinton’s data and to further explore the usage of the cluster and some communicative strategies in more context.

[Extract 1]

Journalist: Mike, in the Lewinsky matter the President has declined repeatedly to testify to the grand jury. Why so?

McCurry (podium): **I don't know** that he has declined. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that Mr Kendall, his attorney, has had discussions and has on-going discussions with Mr Starr to that question. **I don't know** what the outcome of those deliberations are, but you should inquire further of Mr Kendall.

In the excerpt above, the Podium uses the cluster to deny a specific answer for being unaware that the President had declined to testify to the grand jury. The spokesperson subsequently provides some additional information which is nevertheless presented as uncertain, by using the hedging proposition 'If I am not mistaken'. This allows him to provide some information but also to stress the provisional status of his assertions. A similar uncertain meaning is conveyed in the final sentence by expressing lack of knowledge on the status of deliberations again with 'I don't know'. Finally the spokesperson reinforces the uncertain status of his information by referring to other sources and suggesting that the journalist inquires further of the President's attorney.

[Extract 2]

Journalist: The question is what you were asked this morning, why not put out the correspondence between the President and Monica Lewinsky?

McCurry (podium): A, **I don't know** if there is such correspondence. There may be, but **I don't know** the extent of it. B, for all the reasons that we have suggested in the past - there's an investigative process underway and that they have been sought under subpoena by the Office of Independent Counsel. To my knowledge these materials have not been sought, but I don't rule out the possibility that the OIC will want to seek them at some point.

Extract 2 offers another example of how 'I don't know' was used by the Podium to express lack of knowledge, competence and evidentiality. The excerpt shows the interplay of various dialogic alternatives in discourse (Martin and White 2005). Initially the Podium presents different propositions in the text but these assertions are subsequently confronted and limited ('I don't know if there is such a correspondence. There may, be but I don't know the extent of it') with the ultimate goal of showing lack of knowledge and responsibility for what is being discussed. This is also stressed later in the text when the spokesperson refers to his degree of knowledge on the matter and when he also mentions other authorities, 'Office of Independent Counsel', involved in the investigative process, 'I don't rule out the possibility that the OIC will request it'.

[Extract 3]

McCurry (podium): He's just pleased that things are working out for her [Ms. Lewinsky]

Journalist : What do you mean, working out for her?

McCurry (podium): That's you asked his reaction; that's his reaction.

Journalist: Well, why does he think this means things are working out for her?

McCurry (podium): **I don't know** that it's other than a self-evident statement that things are working out for her.

Journalist: Ms. Lewinsky has just acknowledged committing a felony. How is that working out for her?

McCurry (podium): If I understand correctly, she's been granted transactional immunity. That's what I heard her lawyer report.

Extract 3 presents a fairly controversial exchange between a journalist and the Podium about the President's reaction to Ms. Lewinsky's circumstances. In the extract we saw a rather insistent question coming from a journalist asking how acknowledging felony could be seen positive, aimed at triggering a more subjective interpretation of the President's reaction. The spokesperson's response appears to be resistant to the journalist's reiteration by distancing from what the Podium describes a 'self-evident statement'. A similar strategy can also be observed in the use of other markers of uncertainty 'if I understand correctly' and by sourcing assertions in external and official sources, 'that's what I heard her lawyer report'.

3.2 'I don't know' in the Bush Sub-Corpus

The cluster occurred 998 in the first presidential term and 2635 in the second one. The analysis of its collocates highlighted a set of lexical items, *exact, referring, answer, check, specific, specifically, referring, emails, honestly, exactly, necessarily, details* that overlap to a certain extent to the ones found in the Clinton sub-corpus. This is a first confirmation that the use of the cluster is a constant feature of the language of the genre of press briefings, regardless of the various speakers. What changes, and our analysis tries to highlight, is the strategic use of the cluster in specific communicative events and according to the different communication strategies.

A closer look to a sample of 100 randomly selected concordances of the cluster showed that 'I don't know' was used: 1) to express lack or absence of evidence; 2) to introduce a countering proposition to present a different assertion as more valuable; 3) to reduce an absolute commitment or a definite answer. The analysis of the concordances also revealed a recurrent use of the cluster in instances where controversial issues are raised by the press as the following extracts exemplify.

Extract 4, below, is an example of the strategy enacted by the podium to distance himself from acknowledging what the journalist is implying, i.e. overt recognition from the White House of the British dossier of weapons of mass destruction. Framing the answer within his impossibility to 'predict the future', the podium deviates the topic through an analogy, 'on piling one more foot on to Mount Everest', claiming that the answer on the dossier is unnecessary due to the existing 'mountain of evidence against Saddam'.

[Extract 4]

Journalist: Yes, Ari. Should we regard the British dossier as the final or definitive word on what is known by Western intelligence about his weapons programs?

Fleischer (podium): I can't predict the future. **I don't know** if any other information is going to come out. But, again, I don't think this rests on piling one more foot on to Mount Everest. The mountain of evidence against Saddam Hussein is plenty high already.

Journalist: But did you know of any plans for the U.S. to do something similar?

Fleischer (podium): As I indicated, I'm not going to predict the future.

When confronted with unwelcomed issues, the podium has to devise ways of finding a way out. In Extract 5 the podium begins by claiming lack of knowledge repeatedly, also through the use of one of the collocates we had identified, *honestly*, and trying to avoid the topic altogether 'if we want to keep them secret, I'm not going to tell you'. Throughout the exchange the podium tries to maintain a relationship with the journalist in order to avoid a face threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987) that would hinder the common goal of information exchange. He does so calling the journalist by her first name 'Jessica', then giving her credit, 'It's a good question', and finally resorting to humour, 'does anybody in the room have any secret programs ...'. Nevertheless he manages to avoid an answer, due to repeated lack of knowledge, and stresses his willingness to cooperate, 'we'll see if we can get anything for you', were he in a position to do so.

[Extract 5]

Journalist: Because you guys are taking such an aggressive stance on media disclosure, I'm wondering if you can tell us ... without giving any specifics (.) if there are any programs the administration has asked the media to keep secret that any members of the media have and are currently keeping secret?

Snow (podium): I honestly **don't know**, Jessica. I'll try to find ... **I don't know**. And, obviously, if we want to keep them secret, I'm not going to tell you

Journalist: No, but without specifics ...

Snow (podium): But if I can find out a number ... but, honestly, I really don't know. It's a good question, and I don't have an answer. And we'll see if we can get anything for you, but I don't know ... maybe ... does anybody in the room have any secret programs you're working on that we're helping you out with?

Extracts 6 and 7 introduce a controversial issue that has dominated the briefings for some time in 2007, i.e. the Bush White House email controversy (*emails* was one of the collocates of the cluster in the Bush sub-corpus).⁵

[Extract 6]

Journalist: How many people have those accounts?

Perino (podium): I think it's a handful, I don't think it's a lot. [...] Can I go to the back and come back? Victoria.

Journalist: Is the White House also in touch with Bush-Cheney 2004, over their email accounts?

Perino (podium): Not that I know of. Bush-Cheney 2004 (.)

Journalist: Bush-Cheney 2004 email accounts were also (.)

Perino (podium): **I don't know**. Let me get back to you. **I don't know** how those emails were (.) you mean if people had both an RNC email and a Bush-Cheney email? I think [...] but those are technical questions I can't answer right now.

[Extract 7]

Journalist: Is it the White House's position then that it would be, or would have been inappropriate to have disposed of any emails of RNC or Bush-Cheney 2004 email accounts?

Perino (podium): I don't know all the policies that have been in place, but I know that anything (.) that we would want to make sure that we are in compliance [...] [with] the Hatch Act, [...] but we also want to make sure that we are in compliance with the Presidential Records Act.

In both exchanges the podium tries to change topic either directly, 'Can I go to the back and come back?', or by focusing on a different aspect 'we would want to make sure that we are in compliance'. As in Extract 5 the avoidance is hedged to avoid a direct denial; the journalist is referred to by her first name, 'Victoria', and lack of specific (technical) knowledge is advocated as the main reason for not committing to a definitive answer, particularly in Extract 6, 'I don't think it's a lot', 'Not that I know of', 'I don't know' (twice), and 'those are technical questions I can't answer right now'.

3.3 'I don't know' in the Obama Sub-Corpus

The cluster occurred 2152 in the Obama's sub-corpus with the following items as its main collocates: *check, answer, exact, whether, degree, honestly, obviously, honest*. A scan of a sample of 100 randomly selected concordances of the phrase showed that 'I don't know' was used: 1) to express lack of knowledge; 2) to introduce a countering formulation to present more positive facts; 3) to avoid commitment.

The first function is mainly given by the presence of the dot after the phrase, which signals a hesitation and works as an expression of lack of knowledge above all when no further formulations follow. The same function is

represented by the phrase in company with the usual friend *answer* in phraseological wordings like *I don't know the answer to that; I don't know the answer to that off the top of my head*. Sometimes the lack of evidence and reduction of commitment is mitigated by the presence of the interpersonal adverb *honestly* and the promise 'to check' in the future on that particular issue. Another phraseological construction which hedges the lack of knowledge and commitment so as to appear less open to challenge is *I don't know the degree to which* as in a randomly chosen citation: *I think you are - I don't know the degree to which they have heard everything that the President said*. In this instance the use of the interpersonal metaphorical 'I think' contributes to soften the assertion together with the very frequently used collocate 'degree'.

In the other instances different functions come out according to the phraseological environment in which the cluster is found. For example it is used strategically to avoid any controversial issues on some delicate topics like the health care by shifting attention to its positive developments, as it can be observed from the following example:

[Extract 8]

Journalist: Two quick questions on health care, Robert. First, this morning I heard an interesting criticism of the President. I'm wondering if you can respond to it. David Gregory was saying that he felt that the President's ability to engage the opposition was both a strength and a weakness, it being a weakness because the American people prefer ... they like a fighter, but they prefer a President who will stand back and achieve. A response to that?

Gibbs (podium): I didn't see the ... **I don't know** the context of the comments. I think what the American people got a chance to see, and what they've seen over the course of his presidency, is somebody who is willing to sit down, like yesterday, and listen to people's ideas, to engage lawmakers, and to engage the American people directly in discussions about the problems that we face.

In the above extract the podium resorts to the negative cluster to avoid taking a stand for what the reporter felt about criticism of the President concerning the topic of health care. The Podium relies (as he often does) on another mental verb 'I think' or hedging device to say what he really wants to say. In this case, indeed, the ideological intent is to express praise and politically-motivated appreciation for the President, described as a practical man able to 'listen' to the others but above all to involve them in 'the problems that we face'. What comes out is the image of a president who aims to construct a cordial, cooperative and constructive relationship with his citizens.

Similarly, in extract 9 the podium shifts to what he really knows: Obama's administration has made progress and it is still making progress with health reform with respect to the failure of the past administrations as stated in extract 10. The focus is on factuality and is reflected in the language by the use of material verbs (e.g. 'make progress').

[Extract 9]

Journalist: As you know [...] they don't want to vote for a provision that passes in the House and the Senate does something else less controversial. Is the President on board with that? Does he think that the House and the Senate should have basically the same funding mechanism for this bill so that no one side has to walk the plank?

Gibbs (podium): **I don't know** if that will specifically come up, or has specifically come up in today's meeting. I know that the President is encouraged, as you heard him in the Rose Garden say, in terms of the amount of progress that we've made, that we're closer to health care reform than we've been in 40 or 50 years. I assume many of these issues, particularly cost (.) not just cost of health care but how to pay for it (.) will come up. **I don't know** if he believes that both proposals should be identical, but hopes that we continue to make progress on both sides of Capitol Hill so that we can get a bill closer to his desk.

When the collocates *if/whether* follow the cluster it takes on a pragmatic function: the Podium uses indirect forms to soften speech acts in order to protect the face of his addressees and then he shifts on what he 'knows'. The pattern varies but basically it introduces a dialogic formulation, as seen in the previous sub-corpora, by which the spokesperson counters what he has been asked by introducing a more valuable assertion either through another mental process (e.g. I think; what I know) or directly through the use of the counter-expectational 'but' as in the extract 10.

[Extract 10]

Journalist: I was having a conversation with Congressman Leonard Boswell a week or so ago in Iowa and he said that the President had told him and a group of other lawmakers that he was willing to be a one-term President if it (.) if that meant getting health care reform through. Is that a message that you've heard him say and that he has said to other groups, other lawmakers, and is that his view?

Gibbs (podium): Well, **I don't know** that I've specifically heard it around health care, Jeff, but I have heard him (.) I have heard the President say that if making tough decisions in getting important things done that Washington has failed to deal with for decades means that he only lives in this house and makes those decisions for four years, he's quite comfortable with that. The way he approaches this issue, the economy, Afghanistan, Iraq (.) any of these issues (.) is not in a mode of self-preservation, but in a mode of how best (.) how best, given all of the information out there, how best can he make decisions that he thinks are in the best interest of the American people (.) not what's in the best interest of his personal polling numbers.

Again, the podium intentionally evades the question with his 'I don't know' which is the frequent response in this awkward situation serving the purpose of safeguarding his national interests. Rather than informing the addressee on the president's message of being one-term president if the health reform passes the podium provides the press with another piece of information. The cluster is then used as a form of covert evasion by which the speaker pretends to reply but actually he does not and shifts strategically to another message.

Put it differently, the podium manipulates the focus of the question (Galasinski 2000: 61).

4. Concluding Remarks

The cluster 'I don't know' attests to the essential question-response structure of briefings as in spoken interactions and confirms the shifting role of the podium as a relayer of information and as 'doing the job' (Partington 2003). But the podium also uses it to soften speech acts in order to protect the face of his addressees and in this case the cluster performs a more 'pragmatic function', above all when indirect formulations follow (e.g. if/whether). This pragmatic functions seems predominant when controversial issues are raised by the press, as attested by the examples commented in paragraph 3.

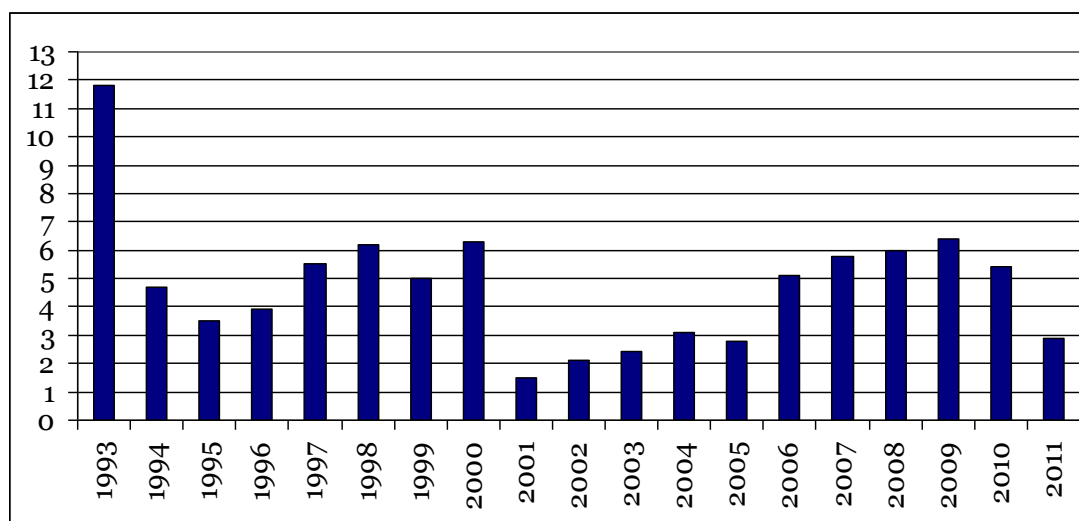


Figure 2: Per million word frequency of 'I don't know' per year

If we go back to the issue of the distribution of the cluster in the corpus, discussed in paragraph 3, we notice that the cluster is underused by the podium during the first Bush administration. This is even more evident if we look at the distribution of the cluster per year contained in Figure 2. The extremely low frequency of 'I don't know' in 2001 and 2002, the first two years of George W. Bush presidency may lead to think that the podium either did not face controversial issues or did not mitigate his/her answers. In a previous study (Cava et al. 2009) we analysed the main key clusters used by the different press secretaries, and found out that the communicative strategy adopted up to the end of the first presidency tended to highlight the role of the president by foregrounding his role as attested by the main clusters used, 'and the president is', 'the president believes that', 'the president will continue', 'the president looks forward', 'the president thinks it', and to present information through extremely assertive clusters such as 'to make certain/sure that'. Controversial issues cannot be avoided altogether and the podium has to resort to strategies to deal with them as analysed in the previous paragraph.

In addition to the common patterns of use, the analysis has also highlighted that, across the five presidencies, press secretaries display different communication strategies (Kumar 2007). In the Clinton's sub-corpus 'I don't know' shows that the podium is more open to issues raised by the press in particular when Clinton took office. In the George W. Bush sub-corpus, the cluster seems to point to a more explicit ideological intent aimed at highlighting the role of the President only; whereas in the current administration the press secretary relies on the cluster mainly to avoid answers for not planned topics and it becomes an effective strategy in switching to related presidential agenda.

Thus, if it is true that the findings show that the negative cluster is used for politeness reason and evasiveness, it is also true that it is utilized strategically to cut short on thorny aspects like those of the health care reform by shifting immediately the conversation on other aspects which aim to praise the current administration by highlighting practical results. Indeed, the pattern usually used to ideologically focus on positivity is *I don't know...but I/the president + (mental verb) think(s), believe(s), hope(s)*.

Notes

- ¹ This article has been jointly planned: Silvia de Candia is responsible for section 3.1, Cinzia Spinzi is responsible for sections 2, 2.1, 3.3, Marco Venuti is responsible for sections 1, 3.2, and 4.
- ² As reported by Kumar (2007: 5), about 350 people employed at the White House at the beginning of George W. Bush's second term were assigned to work in communication and publicity.
- ³ We are currently updating the corpus to include all the Briefings held during the first Obama Presidency.
- ⁴ Collocates are words that frequently co-occur with each other. Significant collocation is computed when collocates 'co-occur more often than their respective frequencies and the length of text in which they appear would predict.' (Sinclair and Jones 2007: 227).
- ⁵ Congressional requests for administration documents while investigating the dismissals of the U.S. attorneys required the Bush administration to reveal that not all internal White House emails were available, because they were sent via a non-government domain hosted on an email server not controlled by the federal government. The administration officials had been using a private Internet domain, called gwb43.com, owned by and hosted on an email server run by the Republican National Committee, for various communications of unknown content or purpose.

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