

U.S. PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURAL ADDRESS SPEECHES: A GENRE ANALYSIS

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This work is an academic assignment which was completed for the LLT 809 course requirements.



1. Introduction

Genre awareness is a **valuable asset** for ES/FL learners. For example, in pre-reading activities, it can be an important **schema-activation** resource that helps scaffold difficult passages. One way to develop it is through exploring the **conventions of the inaugural address political speech genre**. This serves as a tool for students to build not only their knowledge on **rhetoric**, but also to foster **critical awareness** of broader social discourses.

2. Research questions

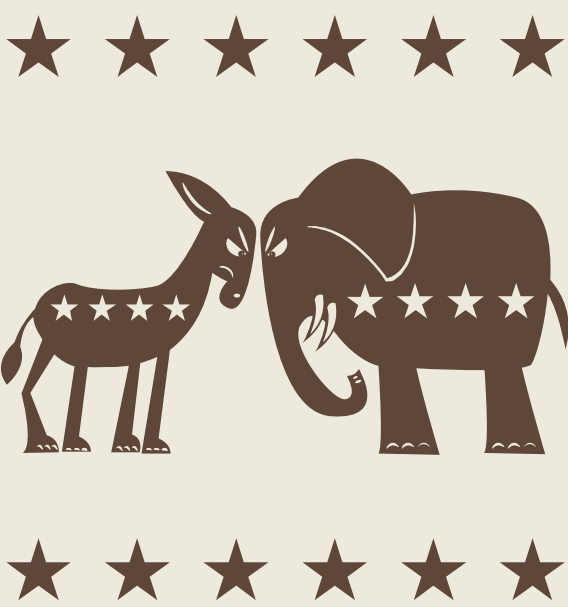
RQ1. What are the common rhetorical moves and textual conventions of U.S. inaugural address speeches?

RQ2. Using corpus analysis, what are the most frequent word items and bundles across the 42 speeches?

RQ3. How can the findings from the speeches' genre/corpus analysis be valued in an ES/FL context?

3. Sampling Procedure

I compiled all the United States' presidential **inaugural address speeches** (or addresses upon assuming the Office of President of the United States) ever given (only the first one for presidents who served multiple terms, with a total of **42 speeches**, given over 236 years, from **1789** to **2025**). I retrieved them from the [Inaugural Addresses | The American Presidency Project](#) website, and I conducted a **corpus analysis** on the texts, informed by Swales' (1990) genre theory and model, and using the [AntConc](#) software.



4. Results/Findings

Most common **Rhetorical Moves**

MOVE 1. OPENING

Step 1.1 Greeting 31

- speaker welcomes the audience
 - "Fellow-Citizens..." (Van Beuren, 1837)
 - "My Countrymen..." (Pierce, 1853)
 - "Mr. Vice President, Mr. Chief Justice, fellow citizens..." (Truman, 1940)

Step 1.2 Gratitude 14

- speaker gives thanks
 - "I am deeply impressed with gratitude for the confidence reposed in me." (Polk, 1845)
 - "For myself and for our Nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land." (Carter, 1977)

Step 1.3 Giving context 42

- speaker recognizes the importance and the (historical) context of the event
 - "I must be permitted to say that I have been almost overwhelmed by the announcement of the sad event which has so recently occurred. I feel incompetent to perform duties so important and responsible as those which have been so unexpectedly thrown upon me." (Johnson, 1865)

MOVE 2. VISION

Step 2.1 Values 42

- the main body of the speech
- speaker outlines their political convictions
 - "In the revision of the tariff especial attention should be given to the re-enactment and extension of the reciprocity principle of the law of 1890..." (McKinely, 1897)
 - "Public health service should be as fully organized and as universally incorporated into our governmental system as is public education." (Hoover, 1929)

Step 2.2 Vowing action 17

- speaker shares what they want to achieve
 - "Our supreme task is the resumption of our onward, normal way. Reconstruction, readjustment, restoration, all these must follow. I would like to hasten them." (Harding, 1921)
 - "To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow, to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds." (Obama, 2009)

This analysis builds on the English for Specific Purposes framework and on Swales' (1990) genre theory and model.

MOVE 3. CLOSING

Step 3.1 Building unity 37

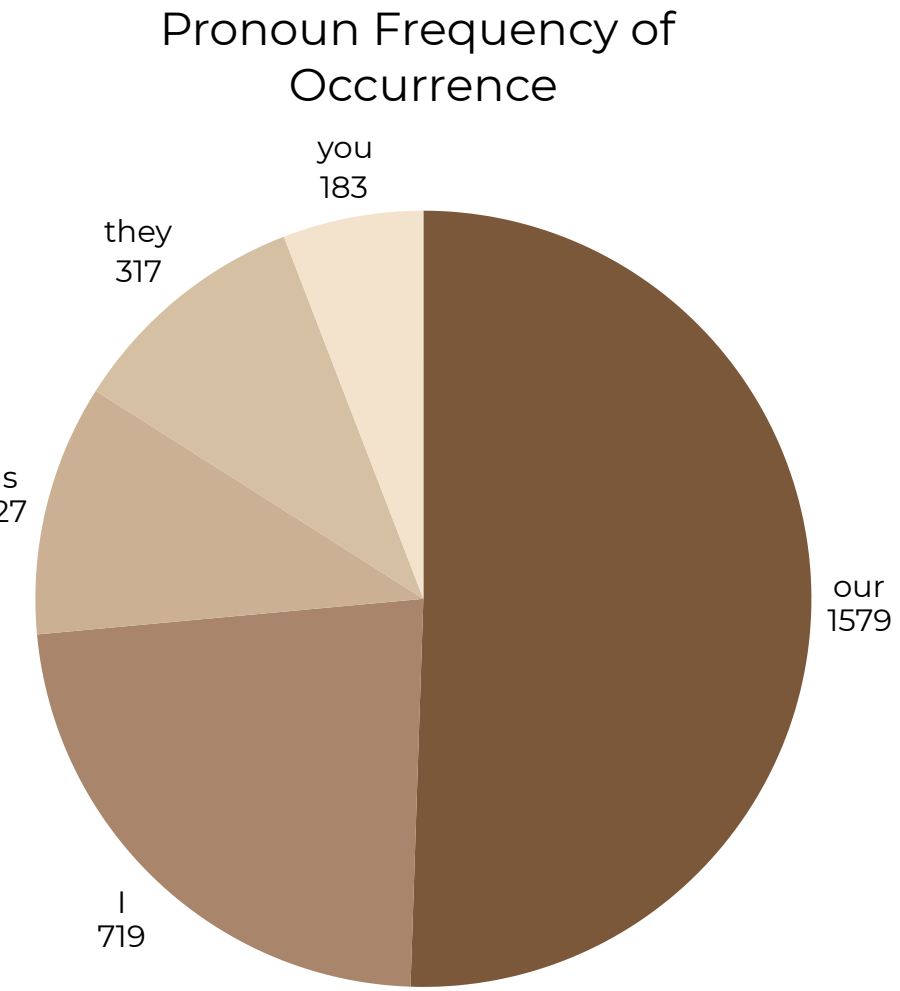
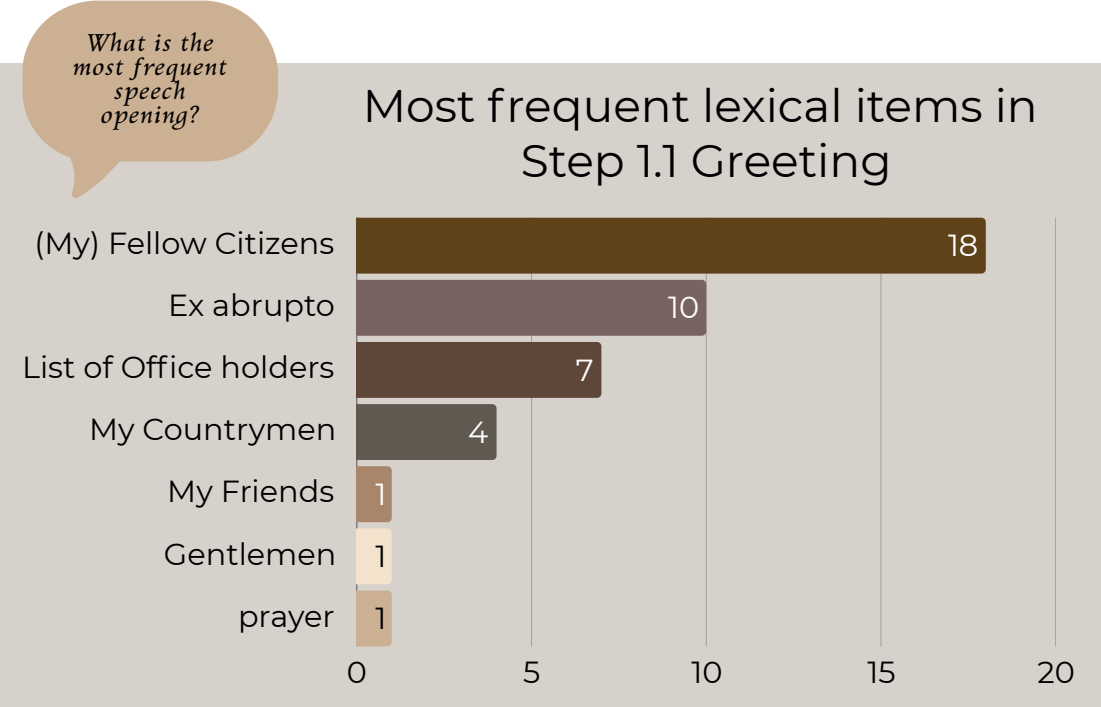
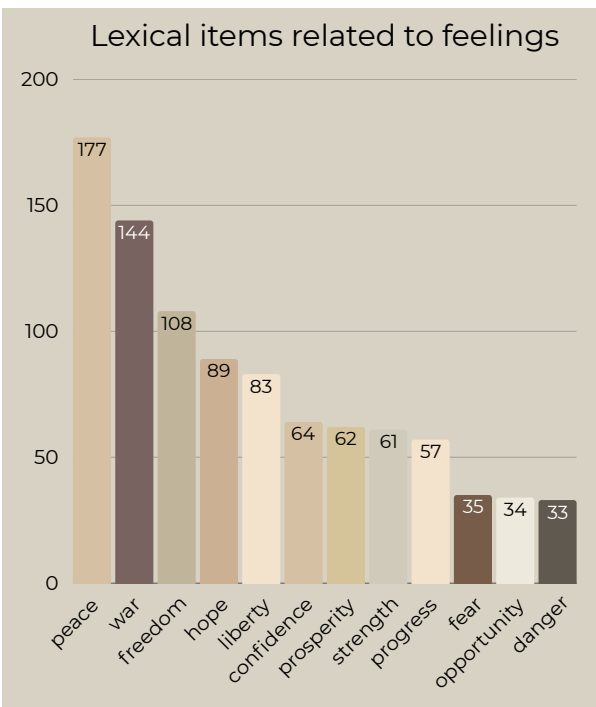
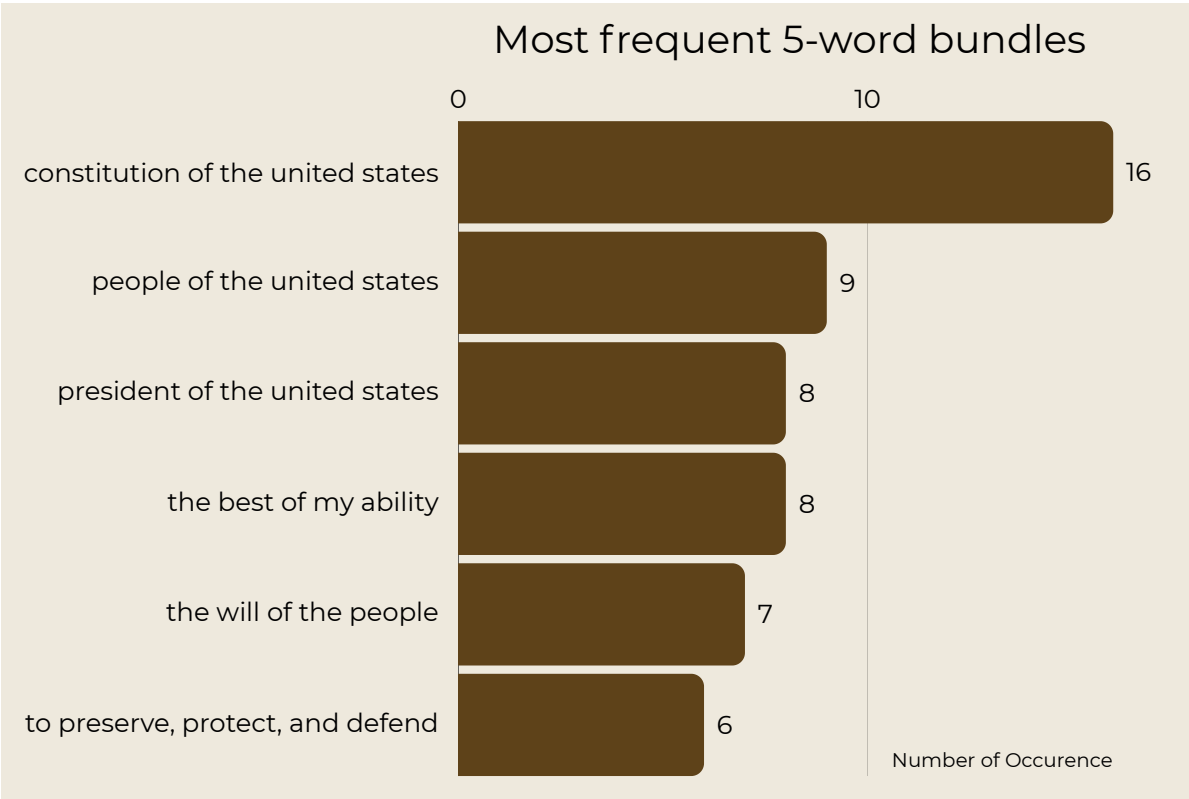
- speaker appeals to audience unity
 - "Looking for the guidance of that Divine Hand by which the destinies of nations and individuals are shaped, I call upon you, Senators, Representatives, judges, fellow-citizens, here and everywhere, to unite with me in an earnest effort to secure to our country the blessings, not only of material prosperity, but of justice, peace, and union..." (Hayes, 1877)
 - "And so, my fellow Americans, as we stand at the edge of the 21st century, let us begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline." (Clinton, 1993)

Step 3.3 Bestowal 42

- speaker closes in a memorable ending
- it often includes patriotic or religious language
 - "America seeks no earthly empire built on blood and force...The higher state to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human, but of divine origin. She cherishes no purpose save to merit the favor of Almighty God." (Coolidge, 1925)
 - "May God bless America, and may God protect our troops. Thank you, America." (Biden, 2021)



5. Analysis



6. Pedagogical Implications

The corpus analysis on the U.S. inaugural address speeches showed that these are a valuable resource not only in terms of students learning about possible **common rhetorical moves** across this genre, but also about elements of **voice, stance, engagement, tenor, field, and mode**, through the frequent lexical items or bundles identified. The teacher can practice with the students, identifying words that show positionality (whether in terms of pronouns, modals, or nouns that are linked to strong feelings), or lexical bundles that signal rhetorical moves. The students can then move on to production of their own, transferring all the elements of voice, stance, engagement, tenor, field, and mode to the **contexts in which they might be likely to deliver a speech** (e.g., graduation).

