Bush vs. Obama

A quantitative analysis of English prefixation in

political speeches

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1 Introduction

This research paper deals with the analysis of English prefixation in a special kind of corpus. It compares the language of political speeches that George W. Bush and Barack Obama have held through the years of 2005 to 2009. At first I will outline the exact concept of the English prefix and its morphological structure. Then I will describe the creation of the corpus I am using for my analysis in full detail. In the last part I'm comparing the use of prefixes of both US presidents in their speeches.

2 The prefix

2.1 General definitions

At first there is the question of what exactly is a prefix. To answer it one can find various definitions in linguistic literature. Here's a small selection of definitions concerning this concept: According to Fromkin (2000:709) a prefix is "A bound morpheme added before a root or at the beginning of a word". O´Grady (1998:725) says that a prefix is "An affix that is attached to the front of its base (e.g., *re-* in *replay*)". Katamba (1993:44) is of the opinion that "A prefix is an affix attached *before* a root or stem or base like *re-, un-* and *in-*". Bauer (2003:338) argues that a prefix is "an affix which is attached before its base. In *untroubled* there is just one prefix, *un-*". And Bieswanger (2006:84) mentions that "Prefixes are affixes that are attached to the beginning of a base, such as *anti-* in the noun *antihero* (*anti-hero*), *dis-* in the verb *disarm* (*dis-arm*), or *un-* in the adjective *unfair* (*un-fair*)". In addition Bauer (2003:338) defines the term prefixation as follows: "Prefixation is the use of prefixes or the production of words using prefixes."

2.2 Morphological characteristics

So we get to know that a prefix is a bound morpheme and that it belongs to the category of affixes. Characteristic for a prefix is its position in front of a root, stem or base. So, to get a better understanding we should have a closer look at the nature of affixes and morphemes. What does the term affix mean?

> An affix is an obligatory bound morph which does not realise (see realisation) a lexeme. Affixes, thus, have to make reference to some other morpheme or class of morphemes in any statement of their

distribution. […] The commonest types of affix are prefixes, suffixes and infixes, although circumfixes, interfixes and transfixes are also mentioned by some authorities. (Bauer 2003:324)

From O´Grady (1998:704) we learn that an affix is a "morpheme that does not belong to a lexical category and is always bound (e.g., *-ing, un-*)". Summing up, Plag gives a quite comprehensive description of the whole complex:

As we can see from the complex words in (7a), some morphemes can occur only if attached to some other morpheme(s). Such morphemes are called **bound morphemes**, in contrast to **free morphemes**, which do occur on their own. Some bound morphemes, for example *un-*, must always be attached before the central meaningful element of the word, the so-called **root**, **stem**, or **base**, […]. Using Latin-influenced terminology, *un-* is called a **prefix**, *-ity* a **suffix**, with **affix** being the cover term for all bound morphemes that attach to roots. Note that there are also **bound roots**, i.e. roots that only occur in combination with some other bound morpheme. (Plag 2003:10)

We can say that a prefix is a bound morpheme attached before (in left position) at least one other morpheme (root, base), may this be free or bound. So, one criterion to detect prefixation is to look at the morphemic constituents. A word containing a prefix can never be monomorphemic, it always has to consist of at least two morphemes (the left one bound) and that's why it belongs to the category of complex words. The other criterion for prefixation is the left morpheme to be a bound one. That's crucial. Otherwise the complex word would not belong to the word formation category of derivation (with affixation), but to the category of compounding where the binary structure consists of two free morphemes. This difference is a source of possible misconceptions. It's not always that clear, if the left morpheme has to be considered as a free morpheme or as a bound one. Sometimes both cases can be argued. For example, consider the morpheme *franken-* as it is mentioned in Bieswanger (2006:93-94) or the example of the cranberry morphemes in O´Grady (1998:144).

According to O´Grady (1998:137-138) "the origin of most bound roots in words […] is the result of specific events in the history of English". He there mentions the examples of *unkempt* and *inept* with *-kempt* and *–ept* being bound roots. They are bound roots, because the once existing word *kempt* has long since disappeared and

the word *inept* is the result of borrowing from Latin. All those words that have a Latinate appearance (or that were probably borrowed from other languages) are tricky cases, if you want to decide whether prefixation is involved. Often they are considered as monomorphemic. That's why words like *receive, perceive, remit, submit, commit,* etc. will be excluded from my analysis of the corpus. See also O´Grady (1998:138).

2.3 General properties of English prefixation

Generally, prefixation belongs to both morphological processes, to inflection and to word formation. But a typical restriction of the English language is its having no inflectional prefixation. All kinds of inflectional affixation are due to suffixation (Bieswanger 2006:86). One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the English modifier-head-structure being head final. According to Fromkin (2000:267) this structure is not limited to compounds, but can be applied to affixation, too:

> Is the structural property of having a head specific to compounds, or is it characteristic of the structure of all words? […] The reason why suffixes can determine the category of the derived word is because they are located in the head position of a word. The reason why prefixes never do so is because they cannot be analyzed as being in the head position. They can therefore never determine the category of the derived word. This presupposes that any morpheme can potentially be a head. It will only realize this potential if it occurs in the right configuration. (Fromkin 2000:267)

In class we discussed that English prefixes do not change the stress patterns of their bases and that they normally don't change the syntactic category of the base words. They merely act as modifiers and therefore don't change the word class but the meaning of the derivative only. (See also the argumentation above.) A rare exception to this rule is the verb *(to) renew*. Because there is no verb *(to) new*, this base has to belong to the syntactic category of adjectives (*new*) and so the prefix *re-* changes the word class from adjective (*new*) into verb (*renew*).

Another potential feature of English affixation that also applies to some prefixes is assimilation. According to morpho-phonological rules a prefix is allowed to assimilate to the first sound of the base, for example: *in-/im-* and *a-/an-*. (See also Plag 2003).

3 The corpus

3.1 Data collection

Since my topic includes speeches of a recently elected President of the US, it's obvious that I wouldn't be able to retrieve sufficient material from printed sources or sophisticated corpus databases. Therefore the data medium of choice has to be the internet.

3.1.1 Barack Obama

My first approach was to look for reliable sources that didn't turn out to be that simple. The undoubtedly reliable source for speeches of the President Barack Obama is the official website of the White House (www.whitehouse.gov). There I could retrieve the Inaugural Address and the first weekly addresses of the President. Unfortunately for my purpose Barack Obama uses the most up-to-date communication channels and that's why his speeches are often published as video streams which I can't use for my analysis. To identify the prefixes I need the transcripts. To look at the spoken word instead of the orthographic word would be too much work for this first approach on linguistic analysis. But I was lucky. Most of the times they provided both kinds of data set. Nearly every video speech came along with its full transcript and if not I had to exclude the speech from my corpus.

All other speeches of the Senator Barack Obama I could find on his official website www.barackobama.com. To have the opportunity to make a chronological comparison of his rhetorical development and to have a well-balanced corpus I handpicked one half of the speeches from the end of his election campaign in 2008 and I selected the other half from speeches he held from 2002 to 2005.

3.1.2 George W. Bush

To find speeches of George W. Bush wasn't as simple as I had thought. My first attempt was a disappointment. I searched the official website of the White House for speeches of old presidents like George W. Bush. But of course there weren't any. So I had to google for an official website of Mr. Bush which I thought I had found on www.georgewbush.org. But unfortunately this is a sophisticated fake website which I didn't discover at first glance. After a quick reading of one speech I had to discover a few too many swear words within an official presidential address; so much for the

reliability of internet sources. At least I learned to be very careful which sources to choose right at the beginning.

All other official looking web addresses of George W. Bush are forwarded to the official website of the Republican National Committee on www.gop.com which I chose for my further research after a quick reliability check. The archive of this website consisted only of older speeches, most of them of the year 2007. So again I chose one half from the most recent speeches (mostly of 2007 and one of 2008) and the other half of the oldest speeches I could detect there (all of the year 2005). At last I searched for Bush's first Inaugural Address to have a counterpart for Obama's one and I found it on www.americanrhetoric.com which proved to be reliable.

In total I searched for 25 speeches of Obama and Bush each. A crucial criterion for a corpus is its being large enough to draw convincing conclusions that aren't accidental or the result of arbitrariness. If the amount of data is too small, you can't make reliable general assumptions. For my purpose a corpus of 50 speeches of different periods of time, different topics and variable length have to be sufficient. It's as widespread and voluminous as I can manage in this limited space and time.

3.2 Analysing the corpus

After having collected and having checked all necessary data, I copied every single speech into different MS Word documents in order to be able to search digitally for strings of letters and to compare search results of selected speeches to other ones. Especially, I had to check before working with the data that all speeches were really held by the intended person. Sometimes a speech ended with a discussion involving the audience or guest speakers. In those cases, I either excluded the whole speech (and chose a better one instead) or I deleted, where possible, the passages not being of the original speaker's origin.

3.2.1 The search method

At first I had to get used to a more sophisticated utilization of the MS Word search tool. After a few tries I worked out a method to extract special strings of letters only at the beginning of orthographic words and not within or at the end of them. The instruction for this special kind of search is the additional character "<" in combination with the prefix one would like to retrieve. In my German version of MS

Word you have to additionally choose the option "Platzhalterzeichen verwenden" in order to get appropriate results.

3.3 Restrictions

I'm aware of the restriction that the MS Word search tool can only look for orthographic words and not for compounds or similar complex constructions and that the included word count tool automatically detects just tokens and not word types. So, I will have to do all other kinds of more specific analyses manually.

Another remark is the difference between the spoken word and the written language. It's obvious that speeches naturally belong to the category of spoken language. For this analysis I had to create a corpus that is based on written language, namely transcripts of originally spoken addresses. It's clear that this is not exactly the same and that this conversion is a possible source of mistakes and misconceptions. Most of the time my data is based on written speeches that were held orally on the basis of the originally written concept and were put online afterwards according to the prepared written version. I suppose that the speeches were more or less accurately read out according to the plan. In which amount and ways they really differ I have no means to control. A few of my selected speeches are real transcripts of freely held addresses. There it's the other way around and possible differences between spoken and written words could have arisen because of mumbling or bad acoustics. So, my results can't hold wholly true for the aspect of the actually spoken words. This restriction I have to admit. A comparison, where possible, of the transcripts and the spoken addresses could be part of another, more sophisticated research paper.

4 The analysis

4.1 Corpus size

For my applied analysis I created two large corpora, one consisting of all 25 speeches of Mr. Bush and the other one containing all 25 speeches of Mr. Obama. Surprisingly, both corpora add up to exactly 106 pages each. The corpus of Obama consists of 63.297 different orthographic words and the corpus of Bush contains 65.654 ones. In sum that's a corpus of 128.951 orthographic words on 212 DIN A4 pages of Times New Roman, font size 12, in normal line spacing. So the quantity of the material is quite vast, but none of both the corpora is much bigger than the other.

This equality is quite satisfactory and the total dimension of material should be enough to draw statistically relevant conclusions.

4.2 Searching the corpus

Because of the limited means to search the corpus (MS Word included search tool) I will concentrate on counting tokens only and not all the different types of (complex) words. As I'm digitally searching for strings of letters at the beginning of all 128.951 orthographic words, I excluded all very frequent and/or productive prefixes that are identical with prevalent beginnings of words like *a-, un-, bi-, di-, de-, in-* and so on. I tried searching for those strings and got hundreds and thousands of hits with only a tiny minority being real English prefixes in a strict view.

As I have mentioned before, words of Latinate origin like *receive* and *submit* are considered as monomorphemic, borrowed words. From a Latinate perspective they can be divided into smaller meaningful elements, but this is an analysis of the English language and not of Latin and so I used a quite restrictive measure to identify strings as real English prefixes. For example, the search for *re-* had hundreds of hits, but many were clearly not prefixes (e.g. *real*) or borrowed from Latin or elsewhere, like *reject, resist, respond, refuse.* Although there are many English *re-* prefixes in the corpus like *(to) rearm* and *(to) renew,* I chose to include only hyphenated words like *re-opening* and *re-enlist,* just because of the smaller amount of hits. A thorough count of all prefixes could be a task for a more elongated future research paper.

prefix	Obama	Bush
Anglo-	0	0
ante-	0	0
anti-	4	0
astro-	0	0
auto-	2	0
bio-	0	0
co-	1	0
contra-	0	0
demi-	0	0
demo-	8	53
dis-	79	23
fore-	13	2
geo-	0	0
hetero-	0	0
homo-	0	0
hyper-	0	0
inter-	5	19
mal-	0	1
mega-	0	0
mid-	0	3
mini-	0	0
mis-	12	5
non-	5	4
over-	40	25
post-	2	0
pro-	10	3
pseudo-	0	0
re-	13	3
retro-	2	0
super-	0	2
tele-	5	0
trans-	4	4
ultra-	0	0
uni-	4	26
vice-	4	0
total	213	173

4.3 Results

In total, I searched for 35 different types of prefixes as you can see in the chart on the right. The resulting numbers are tokens related to their according prefix and not types of different words.

4.3.1 Comparison

13 of all 35 prefixes didn't appear at all in the whole corpus. Neither Bush nor Obama made use of the following prefixes in all their 25 speeches: *Anglo-, ante-, astro-, bio-, contra-, demi-, geo-, hetero, homo-, hyper-, mega-, pseudo-* and *ultra-*. That's a bit more than one third of all analysed prefixes.

Overall, Obama used more different types of prefixes than Bush. Obama used the following 18 prefixes at least for one time: *anti-, auto-, co-, demo-, dis-, fore-, inter-, mis-, non-, over-, post-, pro-, re-, retro-, tele-, trans-, uni-* and *vice-*. Bush made only use of 14 prefixes: *demo-, dis-, fore-, inter-, mal-, mid-, mis-, non-, over-, pro-, re-, super-, trans-* and *uni-*.

And there are a few prefixes that are characteristic for each politician alone (according to this comparison). The following prefixes can be assigned exclusively to Obama on the basis of my corpus: *anti-, auto-, co-, post-, retro-, tele-* and *vice-*. Bush doesn't use them at all. Instead, Bush makes exclusive use of these prefixes: *mal-, mid-,* and *super-*.

As a conclusion one might say that Obama makes a slightly more widespread use of prefixation and if one considers the total numbers of prefixed words (213 tokens for Obama and 173 tokens of Bush) Obama lies ahead in frequency, too.

See also the comparison of both usages of prefixation in the chart below:
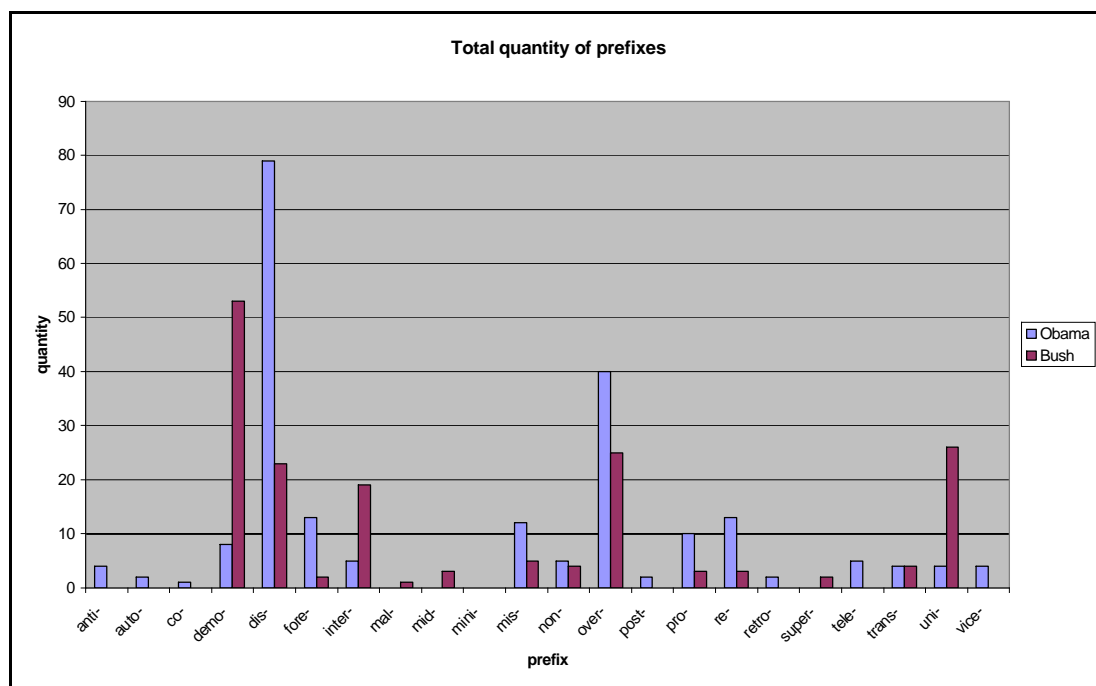
4.3.2 Prefixation in Obama's speeches
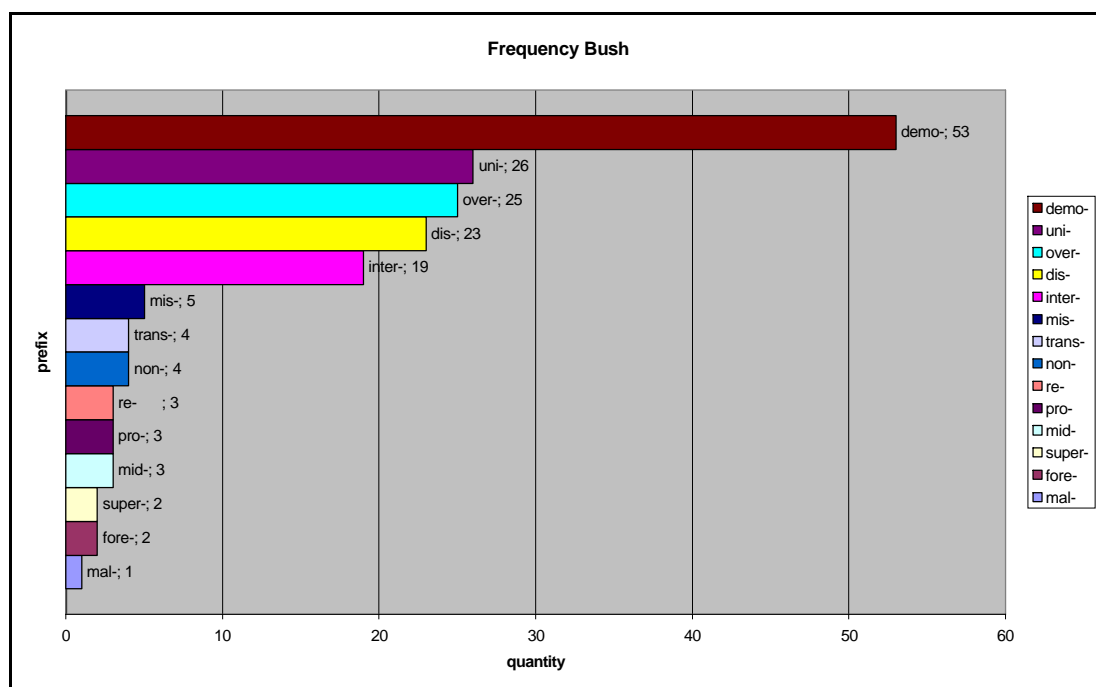

Frequency Obama
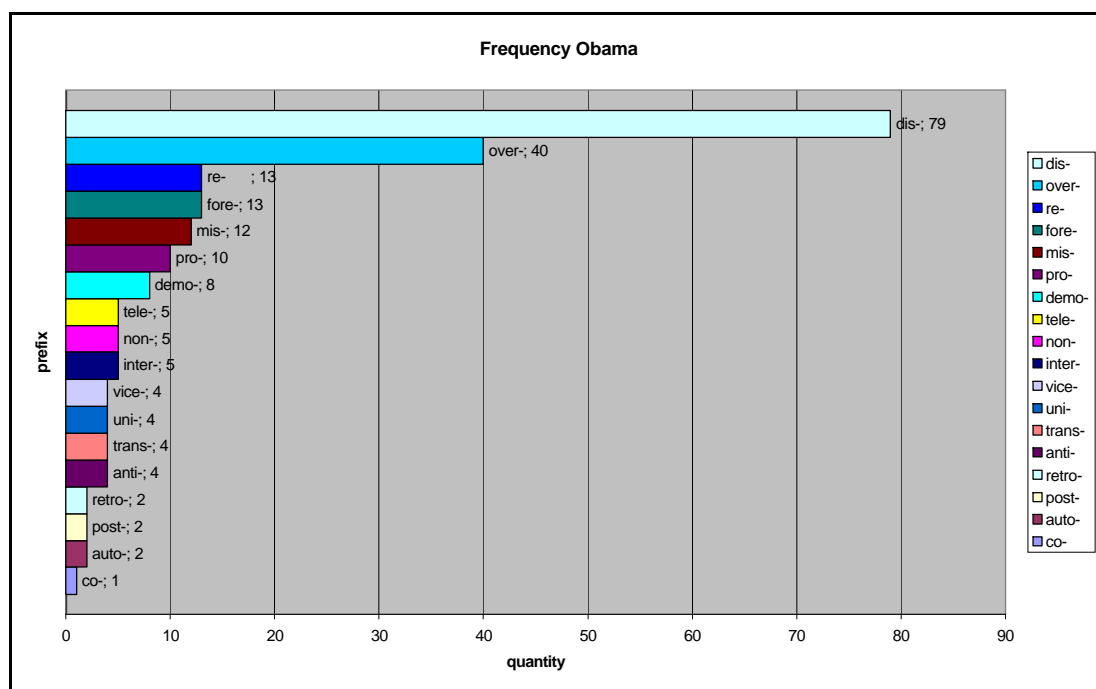
My corpus of Obama consists of 63.297 tokens. I searched for 35 prefixes and got a total number of 213 tokens containing one of the 35 prefixes. In percentage that's a very small number: 0,3365%. As you can see in the chart above there are two prefixes he uses quite often (*dis-* and *over-*) and a few ones that appear from 13 to 8 times (*re-, fore-, mis-, pro-* and *demo-*). All other prefixes occur only a few times which can be a hint for hapaxes and therefore for a higher productivity of the according prefix.

Let us have a closer look at those rarer prefixes, *non-* for example. The prefix *non-* appears five times in Obama's corpus and combines with five different bases: *non-proliferation, non-hospitalized, non-believers, non-sectarian* and *non-defense*. All those words are hapaxes here and so *non-* is very likely a quite productive prefix.

In contrast to that, there is the prefix *tele-*. All five appearances of this prefix are due to the word *television*. So, in this corpus *tele-* is by far not as productive as *non-*. The same holds true for *pro-*: all ten usages of *pro-* exist thanks to the word *pro-America*. The only other prefix that is quite as productive as *non-* is *re-*: 13 mentions result in five different types of words (*re-enlist, re-tooled, re-imagined, re-start* and *re-finances*). All other prefixes are either quite rare or the result of repetition of only a few different types of words.

4.3.3 Prefixation in Bush's speeches

My corpus of Bush consists of 65.654 tokens. Again I searched for 35 prefixes and got a total number of 173 tokens containing one of the 35 prefixes. In percentage that's even a smaller number than Obama's: 0,2635%.

One difference to Obama is that George W. Bush uses less different prefixes and that he has a top-five of prefixes he uses very often: *demo-, uni-, over-, dis-* and *inter-*. Striking is the high frequency of *demo-* (53 times) and that's due to the total of 53 variants of the word *democracy*. Therefore in this corpus *demo-* is not very productive, but frequent.

At first I wondered if I should count *democracy* at all, because it's a borrowed word and therefore monomorphemic in English. But one could argue that the meaning of *–cracy* can be considered as a bound root. Undoubtedly, there is no free morpheme of *–cracy* in the English language, but there are other words like *bureaucracy* with the same constituent and a similar background. Another reason for incorporating *democracy* is its relevance to political language and the frequency within the corpus. Despite, it's also possible to leave out *demo-* within the analysis.

Like *demo-* there are other prefixes in Bush's corpus that are sometimes quite frequent, but not very productive. For example: *inter-* is almost exclusively used for the word *international*, *uni-* for variants of *uniform*, *over-* for *overseas* and *pro-* for *pro-growth*.

Three other prefixes are not very frequent, but quite productive. Like in Obama's corpus *non-* is an example for productivity (*non-binding, non-emergency, non-Mexican*). And *super-* (*super-efficient, super-conductive*) and *re-* (*re-opening, re-energized, re-enter*) are even a bit more productive compared to Obama's speeches.

5 Conclusions

So I can conclude that the language of George W. Bush's speeches doesn't make use of a very wide range of different prefixes and that this is in contrast to Obama. When Bush uses prefixes, he concentrates on repeating a few ones and therefore his language in the corpus is a bit simpler and easier to understand than Obama's. Obama's rhetoric language is a bit more refined and variable. But it will probably be easier to follow George W. Bush's speeches, because of his various repetitions.

But that's what I can conclude from the analysis of their prefixation only. This is no estimation for all aspects of rhetoric language, because I have analysed just a very small part with an overall frequency of prefixation of less than half a percent.

Perhaps, I will get the opportunity to make a much broader and deeper investigation of the topic in the future. The corpus is ready to be searched.

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