

Exploring the evolution of the concept of liberty in the U.S. presidential inaugurals

Rosa Giménez-Moreno and Eusebio V. Llàcer
University of Valencia

As daily news unveils, fundamental human values such as equality and liberty can be expressed through various terms influenced by multiple factors, reaching significant levels of disparity, ambiguity and controversy, particularly in specific socio-political contexts. This article employs advanced corpus analysis tools to examine the lexical and semantic configuration of the “right to liberty” as expressed in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and as North American presidents have transmitted it throughout their presidential inaugural addresses. The corpus of speeches is analyzed diachronically to identify the prevalent terms, connotations, and associated semantic categories and observe their differences and evolution. This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the concept of liberty in this context and highlights its startling malleability in American politics.

Keywords: American presidents, applied linguistics, human rights, political discourse

1. Introduction and background

One of the primary reasons why liberty has been established as an inalienable right within U.S. society is its alignment with the principle of self-determination, which emerged as a fundamental tenet during the 18th-century Enlightenment in America, which emphasized the supremacy of reason, the reliability of human understanding, the intrinsic value of individual freedom, and a deep trust in education and progress (Bercovitch 1995, 368). Consequently, the concept of liberty had to occupy a significant position in the U.S. Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created *equal*; that they are endowed by the Creator with inherent and certain inalienable rights; that among these are *life, liberty* and the *pursuit of happiness*.”

These four conventional abstract terms—equality, life, liberty, and happiness—are based on standard denotative meanings that have become well-known and familiar to most speakers. However, the conceptualization of these ordinary terms tends to be convoluted, from their etymology to their application (Llàcer-Llorca & Giménez-Moreno 2025). As rhetorical specialists in ideographs (i.e. McGee 1980) have remarked, influential politicians and public figures have often used terms referring to moral values, including these four fundamental rights, to justify socio-political decisions and actions throughout history. In contemporary political discourse, such abstract concepts have transitioned from generalizations of broadly understood social realities to “operationalizing concepts” for introducing and legitimizing specific imaginaries and forms of regulation (Krzyżanowski 2016, 310). As discussed subsequently, discourse-conceptual analysis (DCA) (Krzyżanowski 2010, 2016) has facilitated the examination of pivotal socio-political concepts such as “crisis” and “new normal”. This has been achieved by integrating the conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) of Koselleck (1982) with a systematic and critical historical-discursive approach (Krzyżanowski 2019, 2022).

These studies emphasize the centrality of the notion of “semantic field” in analyses aimed at demonstrating how, at different historical moments, various concepts acquire distinct semantic fields and how these, along with the “core” concepts in question, evolve over time (Krzyżanowski 2016, 315). However, few studies on these four human rights have been carried out empirically and systematically from a Lexical Semantic Corpus Analysis perspective. From Frame Semantics Theory (Fillmore & Atkins 1992; Fillmore & Baker 2010), these notions are conceptualized, understood and expressed through a series of meaning constructs or conceptual structures dependent on a series of particular cognitive and pragmatic factors, such as the shared background knowledge between speakers and receivers, contextual circumstances, the speaker’s intentionality, and aim of the speech act. These semantic frames can be central to the concept being progressively added and remaining active over time or peripheral with a temporary and targeted purpose.

In the case of the right to equality, its etymology reveals distinct connotations between “equality” and “equity” (i.e. Merriam-Webster Dictionary), the former historically conveying a sense of moral virtue while the latter being associated with legal justice. However, pragmatic investigations into the meaning of this right in inaugural presidential speeches have illuminated its adaptability across various semantic domains, contingent upon each speaker’s context and profile (Llàcer-Llorca & Giménez-Moreno 2025). The semantic and pragmatic intricacy of these concepts makes us consider and hypothesize that each speaker, in this case, each U.S. president, configures and expresses his own variant of these meaning constructs according to his intentions and political identity from his presidency’s

kick-off in the inaugural ceremony. This predominant semantic configuration of fundamental rights will prevail during his mandate and, consequently, in American society within that period, also influencing these rights meaning internationally due to the influence of American ideology on global structures and institutions:

Building upon this premise, given the considerable variability and significant impact of each U.S. president's voice on interpreting "equality", exploring the lexical and semantic processes underlying the conceptualization of "liberty" becomes equally pertinent. The right to equality in democracies that defend social justice implies the right to escape – to be free – from poverty, oppression, marginalization, or muteness. However, the right to equality acquires sense and worth when the right to liberty is correlated. As Huriot and Bourdeau-Lepage (2012, 4) argue, without freedom, understood as "liberty of choice and action", states fall into an "egalitarian utopia". On the other hand, as Dijn (2020) reveals in her book *Freedom. An unruly history*, this is a highly malleable concept configured with varied significances and nuances within the various sociopolitical contexts it has been treated throughout human history, adapting to different configurations and strategic interests of politicians, parties, ideologies and civilizations. One of Dijn's reviewers, directing the attention towards linguistics, states that "every specialist would be interested to see more lexical, contextual or argumentative nuance having found its way to the final text" (Bizas 2021, 238). However, liberty and freedom have been studied little in applied linguistics, lacking deep and systematic lexical semantic studies that contribute to understanding what these terms actually mean in each communicative context. As a contribution in this line, the primary purpose of this research is to examine how the U.S. presidents have understood and expressed in their inaugural addresses the fundamental right of liberty from the Declaration of Independence through the 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, paying due attention to these right's meaning intricacy and its possible semantic changes over time.

Liberty is derived from the Latin adjective *liber* ('free'), and its nominalization *libertas* was understood as "absence of restraint and permission" (*An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, Lewis 1890). In ancient times, its prevalent use was socio-political, concerning individual and civil liberty. This term became widespread in the 14th century in English within various lexical fields. In legal environments, the sense of physical and civil freedom also predominated; in socio-political environments, it was associated with free choice, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly; in socio-cultural environments, with freedom of thought and freedom of expression; and in moral and religious settings, it usually intended freedom of belief and freedom from sin (*Etymonline.com*, *MacMillan Dictionary*). However, when this term was applied to specific communities,

associations, parties or groups of people, it acquired particular meanings of political, legal and social relevance, even generating specific derivatives for these purposes, as observed in the meaning of terms such as liberal, libertarian, libertinism and libertine. In this sense, in the 15th century, freedom was associated with ideologies far removed from despotic, autocratic and orthodox attitudes. Later, in the 17th century, it occupied a central position within the semantic field of Humanism and Enlightenment associated with freedom of expression and prejudice. These sociopolitical uses have progressively associated liberty (the word and the human right) with specific political parties and ideological perspectives that use it to configure their name and profile descriptions (Dijn 2020).

However, as with equality and equity, the semantics of the English language have also generated differences between “liberty” and “freedom,” keeping the former related to political and legal issues and associating the latter with semantic structures of socio-cultural and moral nature. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, liberty is “The state of being free within society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one’s way of life, behaviour, or political views.” At the same time, freedom is “The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants.” Comparatively, liberty seems to have undergone fewer semantic fluctuations than freedom. Due to its more subjective, individualistic and interpersonal character, the latter is more prone to adapt to modern semantic structures associated with positivity within cultural action movements. (e.g. to be a free spirit, to break free), environmental action movements (e.g. animal freedom, free space), and modern behaviors (e.g. feel free to do something, get free of someone, home free).

As this brief synthesis of the lexical and etymological complexity of the concept of liberty shows, its semantic analysis faces an extensive amount of connotations, subtle nuances and far-reaching implications. From the DCA perspective, these symbolic framings and key argumentative constructs would configure the social imaginary of liberty and shape the collective semantic understanding of a differential conception of liberty that prevails in a society during a specific historical period (Binder 2019; Krzyżanowski 2019). As these experts emphasize, these configurations belong to the domain of collective imagination; they are projected into the future by influential entities such as politicians, academics, social influencers, and news media, and they are dynamic, subject to change based on cultural, ideological and sociopolitical variables (Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska 2022).

On these grounds, the central focus of this research lies in examining these framings, constructs and connotations, here collectively referred to as “connotative associations to this right” (CAR). These CARs will be meticulously explored within the context of an emblematic political genre, the presidential inaugural address, whose significance and singularity as a communicative genre will also

be reviewed in the next section. The study will continue by analyzing a corpus with the 45 U.S. inaugural presidential speeches, identifying and categorizing its CARs, and exploring the correlations between these CARs and each president's notional objectives and policies. It is essential to acknowledge that while the analyzed timespan of each speech is dictated by the different elections and the periods in office, the whole history of the U.S. has served the purpose of framing our results and discussing their possible relations with the political, economic, and social situations at each period and over time.

2. Distinctiveness of presidential inaugural addresses

As experts emphasize, in presidential inaugurals, past and future are ritualistically linked in a present contemplation and traditional values are re-established to link these to the future political agenda while reaffirming what is already believed (Campbell & Jamieson 2008,10). The presidents invoke the past's principles, policies and traditions to project the country into the future using a wide-ranging repertoire of rhetorical strategies, most aimed at convincing people to change their beliefs by strengthening or weakening their current ones (Ilie 2010, 2015). In most rhetoric treatises on political persuasion, inaugural speeches are included within the category of 'presidential speech' along with other genres such as the State of the Union addresses, veto messages, war rhetoric, and farewell addresses. However, due to their distinctive characteristics and sociopolitical impact, inaugural addresses constitute a unique category both as an instrument of consolidation for the presidency as a public institution and as a trigger that shapes each individual presidency (Campbell & Jamieson 2008).

According to Lauer (2015,5), presidential inaugurals are a subspecies of the kind of discourse that Aristotle called *epideictic*, a form of rhetoric that praises or blames on ceremonial occasions, invites the audience to evaluate the speaker's performance, recalls the past and speculates about the future while focusing on the present, employs a noble and dignified literary style, and amplifies or rehearses admitted facts. Within this epideictic rhetoric, the genre of presidential inaugural stands out for its extraordinary intensity, density, expectation and social impact, given that it constitutes the first formal presentation of the new president, where he displays his intentions and ideology out loud as a commanding authority; his words will hardly be so welcomed by such a majority of citizens in another context during his mandate (Biria & Mohammadi 2012).

From a pragmatic perspective, Liu (2012,2407) analyzed thirty-five speeches, called for short "inaugurals", and observed that most reflected a similar structure with distinctive moves such as formal salutations, announcing entering upon

office, making pledges and promises, arousing patriotism, announcing political principles and resorting to religious power. As these moves suggest, the degree of ideological and subjective content that this genre requires and admits is also distinctive, even more so considering its particular degree of abstraction and eloquence combined with its brevity and concentration. Given the scale and heterogeneity of the public, their lexical-semantic configuration should be uncomplicated and easy to follow. However, in inaugurals, politicians deploy a rich repertoire of rhetorical mechanisms both in a positive tone (to influence their audiences and empower themselves in their position, enhancing the positive self) and also in a combative tone (highlighting negative aspects in the opponent's presentation) (Ryan 1993, XV).

In addition to these distinctive structural and lexical features, Kubát and Čech (2016) observed that political and historical circumstances, such as wars and financial crises, remarkably influence the style of inaugural addresses. Also, its lexical richness, thematic concentration, and textual activity have varied over time. These experts have noticed that the first personal pronouns have been changing from "I" to "we" in a shift from an individualistic to a collectivist style. Also, keywords like "states" and "nation" referring to the United States are replaced by words like "world" and "nations", promoting the country's integrative profile at the national level and its international presence as a world power. Regarding our target issue, for example, words like "freedom" and "democracy" were used more frequently in the inaugural addresses after 1950.

Concerning this interrelation between the linguistic evolution of this genre and the historical evolution of American society, Ericson (1997) discussed how emerging cultures in the U.S. have been influencing these speeches, and Mohammadi, Abdi and Eisazadeh (2020) observed how the president's democratic or republican bias has progressively influenced the expression of U.S. global affairs through the modulation of characteristic strategies such as polarization, generalization, hyperbole, positive self-representation, and negative other-representation. Presidents have given speeches with an increasingly personal profile, mentioning information about their private and family circumstances.

These findings derived from analyses in rhetoric, genre studies, and linguistics shed light on the distinctive features of presidential inaugurals, underscoring the rationale behind conducting a lexical-semantic investigation into the evolution of expressions associated with the right to liberty.

3. Methodology

A corpus comprising the 45 inaugural presidential addresses, corresponding to the first speech of each elected president at the inauguration of his mandate, was collected from the database of The Avalon Project from Yale University entitled *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents*. This corpus was edited and contrasted, taking into account other prestigious sources, such as the multimodal corpus of *Famous Presidential Speeches* from the Miller Center (University of Virginia) and Halford Ryan's 1993 compilation called *Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents* (Praeger). The corpus had an extension of 121.211 words, and it has been analyzed differentiating between absolute and relative figures since the speeches' length and CARs density fluctuate considerably (as Table 1 will display).

As mentioned previously, corpus analysis methods have already been used in previous studies on U.S. presidential inaugurals. Following this line, the methodology of the present study uses the corpus analysis tools Sketch Engine and NVivo mainly for lexical-semantic exploration. Manual methodologies have also been used to insert additional significant data, such as the political and ideological affiliations of the presidents and the specific historical period.

Regarding the analysis process, the first phase focused on exploring liberty's primary lexical-semantic field (Coseriu 1975) within the target corpus by searching for the lexical units associated with the concept of liberty, identifying its lexical derivatives (e.g. liberate, liberalism, liberation) and contextual synonyms (e.g. freedom, autonomy, independence, individuality). Sketch Engine was used to help identify these lexical units and their frequency. NVivo was also used to find additional keywords related to the lemma "liberty" and to analyze these lexical semantic units from a contextualized perspective in the second phase, searching for their particular CARs, semantic connotations and nuances (Sansome 1986). Collocations and concordances of these keywords helped in understanding their semantic associations and the semantic coherence of the categories related to liberty within this particular corpus (Fillmore & Atkins 1992; Fillmore & Baker 2012). Identifying the CARs allows us to know liberty's semantic domain (Rundblad & Kronenfeld 2003) and shape its discourse-conceptual imaginary (Krzyżanowski 2010, 2019) in this specific corpus. It also allows us to assess the particular use made of the most popular components of the usual lexical field of this target concept, for example, the difference between personal freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, religious freedom, ideological freedom, and political freedom. It is also beneficial to identify metaphorical and rhetorical occurrences associated with liberty in the corpus; for example, in reference to the Statue of Liberty, birds, stars or other cultural references related to this concept.

Although this study is lexical semantic and mainly concerns core meaning constructs, it has an ideational and, therefore, cognitive projection. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “ideational” is “relating to or involving the activity of forming ideas in the mind”. These CARs, transmitted in such influential and massive events, are predictable to impact the citizens of a country and their understanding of what liberty means at that time. In this sense, the concept of CAR can be correlated with that of an “ideational unit” (Anderson & Demetrius, 1993), even “mental model” (Lehrer & Kittay, 1992) or “cognitive construct” (Bondi, 2014). Although this ideational projection of the CARs will help identify associated experiential domains and interpret the results, the fundamental objective of the present study is to find the primary and salient connotations of liberty in this particular corpus.

For this purpose, NVivo has also been used to code the CARs and examine the liberty clusters in the corpus. In NVivo analysis, the central theme node “liberty” was represented through a series of lexical patterns or codes introduced manually from the results of the first lexical semantic searching stage. This process of thematic coding allows a wider and deeper identification and quantification of the target occurrences and references associated with this constitutional right in the corpus. In the final interpretive stage of the process, the quantitative and qualitative results are analyzed regarding the presidents’ specific profiles as speakers and their socio-political and historical backgrounds.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the results of the appearances of the right to liberty in the description and categorization of coded references, as well as the contrastive description of the results of liberty according to the presidents. Concerning the global quantitative results, as detailed below, the total number of lexical semantic references to liberty in the 45 inaugurals amounts to 430, with over 30 different CARs identified. These lexical semantic units vary considerably in length from a three-word string in Eisenhower to a set of clauses reaching 239 words in Jefferson. The references’ frequency also differs significantly, with absolute numbers standing between 32 in William H. Harrison and 1 in Gerald Ford (0 in Zachary Taylor). Furthermore, relative numbers range from a minimum of 1.15% in Abraham Lincoln (0 in Zachary Taylor) to a maximum of 11.77% in Trump.

4.1 Description and characterization of the CARs associated with liberty

From a lexical-syntactic perspective, the term “liberty” shows a significant presence in the corpus, both in its derived forms, such as “liberties” and “liberality”, and its closest synonymous correlates, which are “freedom” and “independence” (i.e. “the love of liberty to independence and peace,” by John Adams in 1797). The concept is also expressed through modifiers such as “free” and “emancipated”, “permitted”, and “unrestricted” (i.e. “an unrestricted communication with her citizens,” by James Polk in 1845). In order to boost its persuasive effect, this right is often placed either at the end of collocations and idiomatic clusters, such as “true liberty”, “civil and religious liberty”, “sacred fire of liberty”, “the blessings of liberty”, “personal liberty”, “general cause of liberty”, or at the beginning in “freedom of religion”, “freedom of the press”, “freedom of person”, “liberty to independence”, “freedom of opinion”. The most frequent phrasal structures are doublets such as “liberality and justice” or “democracy and freedom” and triplets such as “life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness” or “the freedom, the purity, and the frequency of popular elections”. The configuration of these lexical bundles determines this right’s conceptualization semantically and discursively, as we see in these synonymous doublets: “liberality and justice” and “democracy and freedom”.

From a cognitive-semantic view, the findings demonstrate that liberty, as well as the right to happiness, are concepts with a focal functional configuration markedly consequential, pervasively transmitted as the ultimate consequence of a series of crucial factors (i.e. “to favor in like manner the advancement of science and the diffusion of information as the best ailment to true liberty,” by James Madison in 1809, and “Our public interest depends on private character, on civic duty and family bonds and basic fairness, on uncounted, unhonored acts of decency which give direction to our freedom,” by George W. Bush in 2001). This informs of the potential changes in the concept’s meaning depending on the circumstances and the elements accompanying the term, explicitly or implicitly mentioned. In this way, the corpus reveals that, depending on the historical context and the intention of the speaker, liberty is presented as a result of justice and equality, the end of slavery, socio-political independence, economic autonomy, citizen security, control of radicalism, respect for civil rights (freedom of opinion, and sexual and religious choices), and security against external threats. This consequential configuration seems to have been maintained over time as part of the global identity of the concept. An indication of this phenomenon is found in the word cloud of the term liberty provided by the Open American National Corpus (OANC), where the most prominent associated term is “prudence”, possibly as the best way to manage these conditioning factors and reach the fullness of the concept.

Being more specific, the embodying of the right to liberty in this corpus entails the following CARs (in alphabetical order): blessing, cause, citizenship, civil rights, defence, democracy, dissent, energy, entrepreneurship, equality, freedom of person, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom to regulate, happiness, harmony, ideals, independence, intelligence, interest, justice, law, natural rights, property, renewal, responsibility, security, toleration, tranquility, union and voice of the people. Within this entire conceptual compendium, the most recurring CARs are:

- a. In the first position, citizenship, democracy and harmony (e.g. “a reverence for the characteristic rights of freemen and a regard for the public harmony will sufficiently influence our deliberations on the question of how far the former can be impregably fortified or the latter be safely and advantageously promoted,” by George Washington in 1789; “Union, justice, tranquility, the common defense, the general welfare, and the blessings of liberty –all have been promoted by the Government under which we have lived,” by John Quincy Adams in 1825).
- b. Freedom of the press follows in prevalence (i.e. freedom to inform and dissent with the oppressor, adversary or opponent), freedom of person, toleration and voice of the people (“to favor in like manner the advancement of science and the diffusion of information as the best ailment to true liberty,” by James Madison in 1809, “The fundamental precept for liberty is toleration,” by Calvin Coolidge in 1925; “And so I say to all of us here, let us resolve to reform our politics, so that power and privilege no longer shout down the voice of the people,” by Bill Clinton in 1993; “The right to dissent peaceably within the guardrails of our republic is perhaps this nation’s greatest strength,” by Joe Biden in 2021).
- c. Liberty’s CARs are tactically influenced by the concepts of independence, intelligence, entrepreneurship, and renewal (e.g. “Content with the positive benefits which their union produced, with the independence and safety from foreign aggression,” by William H. Harrison in 1841; “Let us be wise and constitutional measures promote intelligence among the people as the best means to preserve our liberties,” by James Monroe in 1817; “So, with all the creative energy at our command, let us begin an era of national renewal,” by Ronald Reagan in 1981).

4.2 Description and frequency of references to liberty according to the presidents

The first move is to establish the connections between the CARs we have found in the first part of the analysis and the different socio-semantic conceptualizations in terms of the evolutive concept of “liberty”, according to the various U.S. presidents in the specific political, economic, and cultural periods in office. As previously mentioned, it is a functional concept of a consequential nature highly dependent on the associations that configure it. Thus, the evolution of the concept of “liberty” in this corpus unfolds as the following socio-semantic causal connections (SSCC) have been established with this concept throughout U.S. history: (a) independence in terms of national identity (U.S. vs Britain); (b) abolition of slavery and the conflict North vs South, also related to status and race; (c) federal autonomy of the states vs centralization of the authority in the National Government at Washington D.C., as from the old polemical debate previous to the Constitution between Federalist and Anti-federalist; (d) civil rights, such as freedom of speech, press, religion, sexual choice; (e) economic and industrial self-determination against other foreign nations in terms of self-reliance; (f) national and public safety and civil security against external threats (e.g. terrorism, radicalism and biological warfare); (g) ideological and economic neoliberalism, expressed as preservation of national identity markers and free markets, particularly in the face of competitors’ sociopolitical and ethical divergence and economic protectionism.

Table 1. Absolute and relative references to liberty in presidential inaugural addresses (with party affiliation and delivery date)

President inaugural address	Year	Party	References absolute numbers	Total number of words	References relative numbers (%)
1 : George Washington	1789	I	7	1497	4.67
2 : John Adams	1797	F	7	2467	2.80
3 : Thomas Jefferson	1801	D-R	10	1908	5.24
4 : James Madison	1809	D-R	3	1233	2.43
5 : James Monroe	1817	D-R	9	3459	2.60
6 : John Quincy	1825	D-R	11	2973	3.69
7 : Andrew Jackson	1829	D	3	1208	2.48
8 : Martin Van Buren	1837	D	3	3912	0.76
9 : William H. Harrison	1841(a)	W	32	8557	3.73
10 : John Tyler	1841(b)	I	6	1703	3.52

Table 1. (continued)

President inaugural address	Year	Party	References absolute numbers	Total number of words	References relative numbers (%)
11 : James Polk	1845	D	18	4900	3.67
12 : Zachary Taylor	1849	W	0	1141	0
13 : Millard Fillmore	1850	W	12	7836	1.53
14 : Franklin Pierce	1853	D	14	3398	4.12
15 : James Buchanan	1857	D	6	2902	2.06
16 : Abraham Lincoln	1861	R-UN	5	4313	1.15
17 : Andrew Johnson	1865	D-UN	4	380	10.52
18 : Ulysses Grant	1869	R	2	1204	1.66
19 : Rutherford Hayes	1877	R	7	2577	2.71
20 : James Garfield	1881(a)	R	16	3162	5.06
21 : Chester Arthur	1881(b)	R	3	469	6.39
22 : Grover Cleveland (1)	1885_(1897)	D	5	1766	2.83
23 : Benjamin Harrison	1889	R	11	4501	2.44
24 : William McKinley	1897	R	12	4055	2.95
25 : Theodore Roosevelt	1905	R	3	1028	2.91
26 : William Howard	1909	R	6	5557	1.07
27 : Woodrow Wilson	1913	D	8	1769	4.54
28 : Warren Harding	1921	R	21	3432	6.11
29 : Calvin Coolidge	1925	R	16	4131	3.87
30 : Herbert Hoover	1929	R	23	3888	5.91
31 : Franklin D. Roosevelt	1933	D	3	1999	1.50
32 : Harry Truman	1949	D	13	2465	5.27
33 : Dwight Eisenhower	1953	R	17	2607	6.52
34 : John Kennedy	1961	D	10	1484	6.73
35 : Lyndon Johnson	1965	D	5	1584	3.15
36 : Richard Nixon	1969	R	5	2339	2.13
37 : Gerald Ford	1973	R	1	949	1.05
38 : Jimmy Carter	1977	D	3	1272	2.35
39 : Ronald Reagan	1981	R	21	2569	8.17
40 : George H. Bush	1989	R	14	2444	5.72
41 : Bill Clinton	1993	D	7	1593	4.39

Table 1. (continued)

President inaugural address	Year	Party	References absolute numbers	Total number of words	References relative numbers (%)
42 : George W. Bush	2001	R	8	1671	4.78
43 : Barack Obama	2009	D	10	2754	3.63
44 : Donald Trump	2017	R	18	1529	11.77
45 : Joe Biden	2021	D	12	2626	4.56

William Harrison’s speech (W) (1841) (32) is the one with the highest absolute number of total references for “liberty” and its synonyms, being also the longest speech with 8557 words. In this sense, absolute results must be complemented by relative percentages (right column in Table 1). From these relative figures, President Donald Trump (R) (2017) (11.77%) stands in the first position in the references to the concept of “liberty” and its synonyms, followed by Andrew Johnson (D_UN) (1865) with 10.52%. The joint exaltation and dramatic increase in William Harrison (W) (1841) (3.73%), in comparison with his predecessors Jackson (D) (1829) (2.48%) and especially Van Buren (D) (1837) (0.76%), might be related to the political escalation of the North-South conflict. Jackson’s (1829–37) office represented a significant change from the previous presidencies, with a racial bias of the original democratic party of the 19th century, which strongly influenced the Jacksonian Era before the Civil War, especially when compared with the Whigs, which were far more liberal in this aspect in that period. Notwithstanding, Jackson contrived to spread the right to vote to all white men and established a rotating system for elective jobs. His and Van Buren’s (1837) later offices meant a significant jump in U.S. democracy. Probably, he was not so interested in liberty and more in justice and equality, even though his Jacksonian Democratic party was at that time racially biased.

Noticeable are the decreases from Pierce (D) (1853) (4.12%) up to Garfield (R) (1881) (5.06%), all presidencies –Lincoln (R_UN) (1961) (1.15%), Grant (R) (1869) (1.66%), Hayes (R) (1877) (2.71%) – with numbers progressively growing slightly up before and during the Civil War (1861–65) and to the end of reconstruction (1865–77), where the most important must have been survival and economic and social transformation, especially in the Southern states, after such a dramatic period. This period, with only the exception of Andrew Johnson (D_UN) (1865) (10.52%), Vice-President to Abraham Lincoln, assassinated in April 1865, is a curious case in which impelling circumstances related to the Civil War (1861–65) first and the subsequent period of reconstruction (1865–77), especially of the devastated South, might explain these low numbers. Although the Third-Party System

(1858–94) was at the federal level dominated by the new Republican party, during the decades of 1870s–1880s after the Civil War and the Reconstruction, white lawmakers on state and local levels in the South passed strict racial segregation policies known as “Jim Crow laws” that made African Americans second-class citizens. Political eras of the U.S. refer to a model of American politics used in history and political science to periodize the political party system existing in the U.S.

Also surprising are the descents shown in republicans Theodore Roosevelt (1905) (2.91%) and especially Howard (1909) (1.07%), from the previous McKinley (R) (1897) (2.95%). These decreases might be related to the beginning of the Progressive Era, right at the end of the Third-Party System, and the Gilded Age (1880s–1890s), in which the Robber Barons made their fortunes, inequality increased by the thousands and social problems caused great social riots due to the enormous economic and social needs.

In the first decades of the 20th century, we observe a noticeable increase in Wilson (D) (1913) (4.54%) from Howard (R) (1909) (1.07%), and a dramatic depression in FDR (D) (1933) (1.50%), between two peaks of Hoover (R) (1929) (5.91%) and Truman (D) (1949) (5.27%). Curiously enough, in both cases, we have a democrat president – first Wilson in a period of cultural “modernity,” right before World War I, and in the second FDR, who shouldered the heavy burden of the Great Depression after the Stock Exchange Crash in 1929, and up to the exaltation of Truman’s presidency (D) (1949) right after the U.S. epic victory in World War II. These two democrat presidents, Wilson (1913) and FDR (1933) were succeeded and preceded respectively by three republican presidents of the new age – Harding (1921) (6.11%), Coolidge (1925) (3.87%) and Hoover (1929) (5.91%) – whose presidencies immediately after the end of World War I, continued, during the roaring twenties, the liberal policies (especially antislavery) after the re-orientation of the old Republican party in Lincoln’s new Republican (R_UN), a party defined in the eve of the Civil War by a new non-racial policy. Moreover, Hoover’s address given in March 1929, at the end of the twenties, was preceded by republicans Coolidge’s (1925) (3.87%) and Harding’s (1921) (6.11%) – succeeding democrat Wilson (1913–21) (4.54%) after the euphoric victory in World War I – when nobody could have foreseen the Stock Market Crash in September of the same year. These three republican presidents, Harding (1921), Coolidge (1925), and Hoover (1929), took office during the Fourth-Party System (1894–1932), also called the Progressive Era. During this period, republicans were more supported by the Northern states after World War I and at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic, social, and cultural movement promoted by the Afro-American community in the U.S., especially in New York, by which the black people called for equality of rights and treatment by the U.S. artistic, cultural, and political institutions.

Republican Eisenhower (1953) (6.52%) succeeded democrats FDR (1933–45) (1.50%) and Truman (1949) (5.27%) during the fifties – after the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the glorious victory in World War II – when the U.S. saw a cultural revolution driven by rapid industrial development and the subsequent rising phenomenon of consumerism, in a period when also the welfare systems experimented a considerable impulse. The Fifth-Party System (1932–1974) was first dominated up to the 1960s by the Democratic Party and later by the Republicans.

From the times of Nixon (R) (1969), moving on to Reagan (R) (1981), and finishing Biden (D) (2021), both Democrats and Republicans have embraced Neo-liberalism in their economic capitalist policies, especially regarding the concept of liberty, which experimented significant semantic shifts. Even if the numbers of Nixon (R) (1969) (2.13%), Ford (R) (1973) (1.05%), and Carter (D) (1977) (2.35%) are similarly low, the concept of liberty becomes more economy-market driven and weaker in terms of freedom of speech and dissent.

During the Sixth-Party System (1980–), the paradigm of liberty mainly splits into a more partisan way of looking at issues in the two main parties based on their different perspectives about social and cultural issues, race and ethnicity, and the proper size of the federal government. Reagan (1981) (8.17%) was an essential ally of the Neo-Liberal turn led in Europe by Margaret Thatcher in the early 80s, meaning a shift of economic policies, particularly in the welfare status quo developed after World War II.

From the 1990s, the great discovery of market propagandists is the idea of freedom. They convince Americans that Government intervention in economic matters threatens their liberties while the freedom of markets becomes the predominant meaning of liberty. Significantly influenced by the Neo-cons, democrats Clinton (1993) (4.39%) and Obama (2009) (3.63%) accepted the neoliberal frame as a natural development of late capitalism, whose impact upon patterns of social organization around the globe was meant to be logical. (Krzyżanowski, 2016: 312). They also advocate for identity issues (the ‘woke’ agenda) and human rights in the U.S. territory, the promotion of democracy, and American national interest in international affairs – including any means of military force – espousing disdain for communism and political left radicalism. On the other hand, Republicans George H. Bush (1989) (5.72%) and George W. Bush (2002) (4.78%) appeal more to a sense of liberty against an external enemy such as international terrorism.

The 2000s and the most recent decade of 2010s are strongly influenced by individualism, global digital hyper-connectivity and economic interdependency, and the subsequent post-truth era in the globalized media. For the right-wing and especially the far-right – i.e. Trump (2017) (11.78%) – liberty is mainly related to individual freedom – isolated U.S. souls who struggle for survival in this globalized

world are led to think that immigrants are jeopardizing their economy and daily lives. Supported by religious fundamentalism, they deny the climactic change, turn their backs on economic globalization by diving into national protectionist policies against immigration, and oppose green transition and ecological sustainability while fighting against feminist achievements such as the right to abortion and the LGTBIQ+ agenda.

Finally, Biden (2021) (4.56%) has ruled more similarly to FDR than to Clinton and Obama, representing a shift in domestic policies regarding social welfare, ecological transition, foreign migration, feminist historical accomplishments such as the right to abortion, and the LGTBIQ+ identity issues, while again following the traditional military interventionism in different foreign wars –Ukraine and Gaza – supposedly for the promotion of democracy and probably also for other economic and geo-strategical U.S. interests.

If we compare percentages of appearance of liberty and its synonyms with the total number of appearances of the rest of the fundamental rights in the Declaration, numbers are high at the beginning of the Republic with Washington (I) (1789) (21.79%), John Adams (F) (1797) (15.86%), John Quincy Adams (D_R) (1825) (17.44%), and especially Jefferson (D_R) (1801) (32.58%). At the beginning of the new-born Republic of the U.S., there was a great preoccupation for the liberty and independence of the new country, freedom of regulation of industry and improvement, new and developing government with freedom of the press, religion, habeas corpus, independent elections, liberty against aggression from foreign European countries, especially England, liberty and law, liberty and happiness. Also recently, there has been a noticeable increase in the percentage of republican Trump (2017) (19.17%), probably imputable to a need for a new sense of liberty impressed from the Neo-Liberal turn in the eighties but dramatically intensified by the new age of global digital hyper-connectivity and economic interdependency, and the subsequent post-truth era in the global media.

On the other hand, numbers are meagre in republicans Theodore Roosevelt (1905) (5.05%) and Howard (1909) (3.91%) and democrat FDR (D) (1933) (3.79%). The two republicans of the New Age were in office during the Fourth-Party System (1894–1932), also called the Progressive Era, a period of generalized social activism and political reform all over the U.S., which embraced the decades from the 1890s to 1920s. The main objective of this movement was to eliminate the problems caused by industrialization, urbanization processes, immigration, and political corruption, mainly produced as a negative consequence of the *Gilded Age* – between the second half of the 1870s and the beginnings of the 1890s – when the country experienced an unprecedented economic, industrial, and demographic expansion, especially in the North and the West, which also caused great social strife due to the enormous economic and social inequalities.

The “Baron Robbers” millionaires such as William Henry Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, Cyrus West Field and Russell Sage share the American national cake with their monopolies. As for democrat FDR (D) (1933) (3.79%), we have mentioned above that his presidency came right after the most notorious financial slump in the world economy – the Wall Street Crash – which brought the Great Depression with poverty and need to the thousands and many other social and cultural conflicts. Roosevelt’s New Deal meant a way to get through this severe economic depression by trying to bring new jobs for everybody while at the same time developing the culture and the social relationships among people in need. Arguably, the right to life, social justice and equity were more desperate during this period than individual freedoms.

5. Conclusion

Through analyzing the U.S. inaugural addresses from a lexical-semantic and evolutionary perspective, this research illustrates how chronology and historical context directly relate to the development and use of this fundamental right to liberty in the U.S. while showing how malleable and moldable this concept is. For example, liberty is a concept that has been built through American sociopolitical history, implying the ultimate consequence of a series of factors (as used by early presidents such as James Madison in 1809 and recent ones such as George W. Bush in 2001) also citizenship, democracy and harmony (as highlighted by George Washington in 1789 and John Quincy Adams in 1825), freedom of the press, dissent, freedom of person, toleration and voice of the people (voiced by Calvin Coolidge in 1925, Bill Clinton in 1993 and Joe Biden in 2021), and intelligence, independence, entrepreneurship, and renewal (as conveyed by William H. Harrison in 1841, James Monroe in 1817 and Ronald Reagan in 1981). This concomitant and integrative nature of the concept of “liberty”, together with its related socio-semantic categories, is closely dependent on the historical, political, economic and cultural evolution of the U.S. Each of the presidents has approached this term integrating various socio-semantic notions in tune with his intentions, convictions and political ideology sculpting in American society, and in its global echo, a concept of liberty that today entails the right to protect and enjoy civil rights, freedom of expression, state and national autonomy, economic and industrial self-determination and neoliberalism, among other notions as significant as strategic.

From a closer perspective, the findings show that the ideological profiles of the presidents’ parties significantly influence the emphasis given to certain CARs of this right. For example, republicans Reagan (1981), George W. Bush (2001)

and Donald Trump (2017) appeal more to a sense of national security, foreign intervention, patriotism and personal liberty, whereas democrats FDR (1933), Bill Clinton (1993) and Joe Biden (2021) lead these questions towards responsibility, common good, democracy, global identity and defence of human rights in the U.S. territory; while noting that high-impact current affairs also affect the predominance and meaning of these cognitive constructs.

The results also emphasize that the percentages of liberty in U.S. inaugurals are particularly high in speeches from the beginning of the U.S. Republic and in more recent ones. However, if, in the former, liberty is referred to as a collective sentiment related to the communal feeling of many people, national and immigrants, becoming part of the same new-born country, in the latter, the sense of liberty seems associated with a rather individualistic feeling of industrial, economic and personal identity and a protectionist policy of the U.S. in front of the menacing globalization. The research displays the complex lexical-semantic categorization of these mental constructs in this particular genre, allowing us to observe how political and historical circumstances, such as conflicts and conjunctural crises, notably influence the style of the inaugural speeches. For example, the shortest addresses with significant structural differences (e.g., fewer moves) are those of the presidents who came to office as vice presidents and were unexpectedly required to succeed their predecessors, such as Tyler (I) (1841) after William H. Harrison (W) (1841), Arthur (R) (1881) after Garfield (R) (1881), Andrew Johnson (D_UN) (1865) after Lincoln's assassination and Ford (R) (1973) after Nixon's resignation.

Finally, the present study emphasizes how analyzing political discourse from cognitive linguistics and lexical semantics can shed light on social, political and historical issues and vice versa. This interdisciplinary study may also be applied to other nations and political systems, focusing on the configuration of their essential rights and the interrelation between this genre's linguistic and cognitive-semantic dimensions and other factors – governmental, cultural and rhetorical – influencing citizens, their mentalities and decision-making processes. We hope these linguistic and socio-ideological insights can benefit politicians, sociologists, philosophers, historians, educators, philologists, translators, and professionals with various interdisciplinary interests.

An extension of the present classical lexical-semantic analysis of liberty would incorporate advanced frameworks that facilitate a deeper examination of the political-ideological implications of our findings. For instance, the aforementioned methodological approach of discourse-conceptual analysis (Krzyżanowski, 2016, 2019) could be applied more intensively and extensively. DCA has gained prominence in recent years, enabling a more focused, detailed, and systematic exploration of connotations deeply associated with human rights.

This approach could illuminate the relationship between discourse and liberty in our post-truth and post-pandemic global context, including the dynamics and changes related to illiberal interpretations of “freedom of speech” and how freedom—or its absence—is articulated in political discourse and integrated into contemporary national identities.

Funding

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with Universitat de València.

References

- Anderson, Roger, and Olive Demetrius. 1993. “A flow-map method of representing cognitive structure based on respondents’ narrative using science content.” *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 30: 953–969.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan (ed.). 1995. *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Vol. 1, 1590–1820*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Binder, W. 2019. Social imaginaries and the limits of differential meaning. *Österreich Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 44 (2): 17–35.
- Biria, Reza, and Azadeh Mohammadi. 2012. “The socio pragmatic functions of inaugural speech: A critical discourse analysis approach.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 44 (10): 1290–1302.
- Bizas, Konstantinos. 2021. “Freedom and its diachrony.” *Global Intellectual History* 6 (2): 238–246.
- Bondi, Marina. 2014. “Changing voices: Authorial voice in abstracts.” In *Abstracts in academic discourse: Variation and change*, ed. by Marina Bondi, and Rosa Lorés Sanz, 243–270. *Linguistic Insights* 187. Bristol: Peter Lang.
- Campbell, Karlyn, and Kathleen Jamieson. 2008. *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Coseriu, Eugenio. 1975. “Vers une typologie des champs lexicaux.” *Cahiers de lexicologie* 27: 30–51.
- De Dijn, Annelien. 2020. *Freedom: an unruly history*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Ericson, David. 1997. “Presidential inaugural addresses and American political culture.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (4): 727–744.
- Fillmore, Charles, and Collin Baker. 2012. “A frames approach to semantic analysis.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*, ed. by Bernd Heine, and Heiko Narrog, 313–339. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fillmore, Charles, and Sue Atkins. 1992. “Towards a frame-based lexicon: the semantics of RISK and its neighbors.” In *Frames, Fields and Contrasts. New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization*, ed. by Adrienne Lehrer, and Eva Feder Kittay, 75–102. New York: Routledge.

- Huriot, Jean-Marie, and Lise Bourdeau-Lepage. 2012. "Utopia, equality and liberty: The impossible ideal." *Utopia and Spatial Justice* 5: 1–17.
-  Ilie, Cornelia (ed.). 2010. *European Parliaments under scrutiny: Discourse strategies and interaction practices*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.
-  Ilie, Cornelia. 2015. "Parliamentary discourse." In *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*, ed. by Karen Tracy, Cornelia Ilie, and Todd Sandel, 1113–1133. London: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
-  Koselleck, Reinhart. 1982. Begriffsgeschichte and social history. *Economy and Society* 11: 409–427.
-  Krzyżanowski, Michal. 2019. "Brexit and the imaginary of 'crisis': a discourse-conceptual analysis of European news media." *Critical Discourse Studies* 16:4: 465–490.
- Krzyżanowski, Michal. 2010. *The Discursive Construction of European Identities*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
-  Krzyżanowski, Michal. 2016. "Recontextualization of neoliberalism and the increasingly conceptual nature of discourse: Challenges for critical discourse studies." *Discourse & Society* 27(3): 308–321.
-  Krzyżanowski, Michal, and Natalia Krzyżanowska. 2022. "Narrating the 'new normal' or pre-legitimizing media control? COVID-19 and the discursive shifts in the far-right imaginary of 'crisis' as a normalization strategy." *Discourse & Society* 33(6): 805–818.
- Kubát, Miroslav, and Radek Čech. 2016. "Quantitative Analysis of U.S. Presidential Inaugural Addresses." *Glottometrics* 34: 14–27.
- Lauer, Ilon. 2015. "Epideictic rhetoric." *Communication Research Trends* 34 (2): 4–18.
- Lehrer, Adrienne, and Eva Feder Kittay (eds.). 1992. *Frames, Fields and Contrasts. New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization*. New York: Routledge.
- Lewis, Charlton. 1890. *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*. New York: American Book Company.
-  Liu, Fang. 2012. "Genre Analysis of American Presidential Inaugural Speech." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2 (11): 2407–2411.
- Llàcer-Llorca, Eusebio, and Rosa Giménez-Moreno. 2025. "Analysis of the right to equality through the US inaugural presidential speeches." *Atlantis* 47 (1). June 2025.
-  McGee, Michael Calvin. 1980. "The 'ideograph': A link between rhetoric and ideology." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66: 1–16.
- Mohammadi, Vali, Reza Abdi, and Eisazadeh Hadi. 2020. "Inaugural Addresses of American Presidents: A CDA-oriented Analysis of Party Affiliation." *Applied Research on English Language* 9 (4): 539–560.
- Rundblad, Gabriella, and David Kronenfeld. 2003. "The semantic structure of lexical fields: Variation and change." In *Variation and Change Words in Time. Diachronic semantics from different points of view*, ed. by Regine Eckardt, Klaus von Heusinger, and Christoph Schwarze, 67–114. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ryan, Halford (ed.). 1993. *Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Sansome, Rosemary. 1986. "Connotation and lexical field Analysis." *Cahiers de lexicologie* 2 (49): 13–33.

Address for correspondence

Rosa Giménez-Moreno
 Dept. English and German Studies
 Faculty of Philology, Translation and Communication
 University of Valencia
 Avda. Blasco Ibáñez, 32
 46010 Valencia
 Spain
rosa.gimenez@uv.es

Biographical notes

Rosa Giménez-Moreno is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and German Studies and in the University Institute of Applied Modern Languages (IULMA) at the University of Valencia. She has been teaching since 1992 in the areas of English Language and Applied Linguistics, as well as English for Specific Purposes. She has widely published research on language variation, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and professional and academic communication, particularly in Social Sciences.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9531-6045>

Eusebio Llácer-Llorca is Full Professor of English Philology in the Department of English and German Philology at the Universitat de València. For more than thirty years, he has lectured on American Literature and Translation in Spanish and American universities and has extensively published research on theoretical, descriptive-comparative, and applied studies on linguistics, translation, and American literature.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3462-8181>

Publication history

Date received: 2 May 2024

Date accepted: 22 August 2024

Published online: 21 October 2024