1. DESCRIPTION (research questions; aims; theoretical framework; research methods; data collection; findings; references):

1.1 Theoretical background

Today’s world is witnessing the development of a “social technology of influence” (Manheim 1998: 100-1), orchestrated by political actors by exploiting a number of means of communication, including the traditional media and new ones, but also by making use of marketing tools and techniques, with the goal of shaping the public opinion in such a way as to gain support for the achievement of specific political goals.

Discourse is undoubtedly one of the primary means through which such advanced communication strategies are realized. In addition to its being regarded as constitutive of the practice of politics, political discourse is indeed assumed to be purposefully “designed to achieve specific political goals” (Wilson 1991: 19) or “designed to be deployed in the service of public policy” (Silberstein 2002: xiv) and, further, “to create and manipulate a specific view of the world” (Wilson 1991: 10), thus contributing in very specific ways to the establishment of social reality as it is. In particular, I argue that the exploitation of specific discourse strategies on the part of individual actors or groups on the political scene goes hand in hand with the enactment of their political strategies, and that most of these discourse strategies are realized through the repetition of patterns and the conveyance of meanings in ways that are invisible to the naked eye.

In line with this hypothesis, I have chosen to adopt the Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach (Partington 2004, 2006, forthcoming) in order to explore a specific discourse type through the combined use of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques, with the aim of identifying the way a number of discourse features are exploited by specific participants in order to achieve specific strategic goals. I intend to carry out a complex investigation that covers a discourse type by focusing not merely on single texts but also on trends and recurring patterns that may be assumed as characterizing the discourse type as a whole, or subsections of it, and by taking into account both the co-text in which a given linguistic feature occurs and the wider context of text production. In agreement with Bayley (2008) – who proposes a theoretical framework similar to CADS – I follow a methodology in which key meanings are identified by examining a corpus as a whole and they are subsequently explored by moving back and forth from text to corpus and vice versa (2008: 38).

1.2 The George W. Bush administration’s press briefings

More specifically, I have chosen to explore the discourse strategies enacted by the participants in one of the most important arenas of political communication today: the daily press briefings that take place at the White House, where the president’s press secretary meets reporters with the twofold goal of responding to their demands for presidential news and, more importantly from the White House point
of view, of setting the agenda for the day by making certain issues more salient than others, according to the priorities established by the administration.

In particular, I focus here on the White House press briefings held during the first term of the George W. Bush administration (January 2001 – January 2005). Indeed, as reported by a number of presidency scholars (Perloff 1998, Han 2001, Kumar 2007), the importance of communications and media relations at the White House has been steadily growing throughout the 20th century, and nowadays “the president and the news media jointly occupy center stage” (Perloff 1998: 58). The advent of the new millennium has then brought with it the rise of the Internet as a primary source of information, especially for the young people, and the multiplication of cable television networks – both factors that have led to an unprecedented transformation in the news cycle, which is now active 24 hours a day and in which pieces of news now tend to have a very short life (Kumar 2007: xxx-xxxi), with the risk of generating a situation where there is “an abundance of information but a lack of understanding of what it means” (Kumar 2007: 2-3). In such a transformed context, the George W. Bush White House has deliberately chosen to make communication strategies one of the key aspects of the administration, working hard on developing specific messages, attempting to place them on the agenda at a given moment, and in such a way as to have them framed by the media as they were intended to be (Kumar 2007: 3-4; 71-72). Due to such a strong emphasis placed on communication by this administration, the press briefings which took place at the White House during those years are likely to represent an interesting starting point for the exploration of the way discourse strategies are exploited by the wizards of communication in today’s political scene.

1.3 The corpus

In order to explore and analyze the texts of the press briefings dating back to the time span mentioned above, I have collected all the ready-made official transcripts of the briefings and of the informal ‘gaggles’ that are made available by the White House on their website1 for the four years of the Bush administration’s first term, amounting to a total of 697 texts and 3,367,340 words. I have subsequently assembled them in a corpus (henceforth WHB0105 corpus), to which I have added TEI-conformant2 XML mark-up in order to be able, when analyzing it, to easily retrieve information about individual speakers and their roles, date, location and type of each briefing, text structure, among other things. In this way it has been possible to carry out a corpus-based investigation without losing sight of the context of interaction, which is generally regarded as a shortcoming of most corpus work (Widdowson 2000: 6-9).

Thanks to the use of the XML mark-up, it has been possible to subdivide the WHB0105 corpus into modules – or sub-corpora – following three different criteria. Each set of sub-corpora can be activated separately when carrying out the analysis. Firstly, the corpus has been subdivided into five sub-corpora on a chronological basis, choosing four major world events that occurred during George W. Bush’s first term as President as watersheds dividing one phase from another. Secondly, the corpus has been divided into three sub-corpora according to the type of press conference: briefing, gaggle or briefing with a guest. Finally, the files in the corpus have been classified depending on the place in which the briefing or gaggle took place. The sub-corpora are quite different from each other in size. However, it is possible to compare them by normalizing raw frequency and co-occurrence data.

2 Complying with the standard guidelines proposed by the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI: http://www.tei-c.org; accessed 29 August 2008)
1.4 Research questions

One typical CADS research question type aims to find out how, in a given discourse type, participants pursue specific strategies by using specific discourse features. In the present study, I focus on research questions of this type. The main aim of this research project may be outlined as follows: what do specific discourse features exploited in the briefings tell us about the ways in which the George W. Bush administration employs briefings in the enactment of its political and communication strategies? More specifically, I attempt to provide an answer to the following questions:

1) what kind of strategies can be observed behind the press secretary’s and reporters’ use of reported discourse in the briefings?

2) how are lexical items identified as corpus keywords and typically used in the jargon of political communication exploited by the press secretary in relation to specific topics and in the perspective of achieving specific political goals?

Although, as Bayley observes (2008: 38), even the length of a book might not be sufficient to carry out the linguistic exploration of a whole discourse type by examining both the whole corpus and individual texts, and by taking into account the wider context of text production and reception, I attempt to cover some of the linguistic features whose analysis might be able to shed light on the most significant aspects both of the communication strategies of the George W. Bush administration and of the White House press briefings as a discourse type.

1.5 Corpus processing software

Corpus processing software specifically designed to handle XML marked-up corpora was chosen for use in this research project to explore and analyze the corpus. The Xaira package[^3^], which is freely available and allows the user to perform XML-based queries, was chosen to this purpose. The main difference between Xaira and other corpus processing software packages lies in the fact that Xaira allows the user to perform various types of query apart from the commonly performed textual ones. It is indeed not only possible to search the corpus for a word, a phrase or a regular expression pattern; XML elements can also be retrieved through a query, and the different types of query can be combined in order to search, for example, for a phrase only when it occurs within a given XML element. These types of query can be of great use in carrying out quantitative analyses without losing sight of the context, which is a fundamental aspect of CADS research. Furthermore, provided that the corpus – as in this case – has been marked-up in such a way as to be subdivided into a number of partitions, queries can be performed in a single sub-corpus rather than in the whole corpus, if necessary. Each query generates a concordance, which is displayed in the usual KWIC mode. However, each concordance line can also be expanded in order to make the co-text more easily explorable. Collocates for an item can be generated starting from a concordance.

In order to perform some additional tasks that are not available in Xaira, such as the generation of keywords and clusters, the WordSmith Tools 3.0 suite was also used in this research project. By combining the tools available in WordSmith with the opportunities provided by the XML mark-up it was possible to carry out more complex analytical procedures which would, however, be more easily performed if integrated in a single software suite, which has not been developed yet.

1.6 Overview of corpus data

[^3^]: [http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/rts/xaira/](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/rts/xaira/) (last accessed 27 August 2008)
First of all, a preliminary analysis has been conducted on the *WHB0105* corpus in order to identify its main features and select potentially interesting items to be investigated in detail. To this purpose, a list of all the words present in the corpus has been compiled and sorted by frequency. Predictably enough, this list mostly contains grammatical words, as is the case with most corpora (Baker 2006: 53-54). However, it already shows that a single lexical item, namely *president*, has a strikingly high frequency in this corpus, where it is the ninth most frequent word and makes up 1.31% of the total items in the corpus. This is not surprising, however, since most communication strategies at the White House revolve around the figure of the president, and this was particularly the case during the George W. Bush administration (Kumar 2007: 76).

A clearer picture of what a corpus is about, however, can only be obtained when a list of the most frequent lexical items in the corpus is compiled (Baker 2006: 54-55). This list does not only include words referring to issues which were on the agenda during the first term of the Bush administration, or referring to actors on the domestic and international political scene, but also words more strictly related to the briefings’ routines, time-related words, mental and communication verbs4, and some evaluative adjectives and numerals.

Since, however, a more detailed investigation requires the researcher to determine whether specific items are not merely frequent, but statistically more frequent than expected in the corpus under examination (Baker 2006: 125), a keywords list for the *WHB0105* corpus has been generated by using WordSmith’s KeyWords tool. Two different corpora have been chosen as a reference in order to generate the corpus’ keywords: the collection of all spoken English texts contained in the British National Corpus (BNC), and the American sub-corpus of the CorDis5 corpus, comprising political and media texts related to the war in Iraq. The keyword lists thus obtained are quite different from each other, although they share some significant features. This is due to the different nature of the two corpora chosen as reference. The former, the BNC spoken, is more likely to share with the *WHB0105* corpus features of spoken discourse; for this reason, in the keywords list obtain by using it as a reference, the majority of words are lexical items referring to issues dealt with in the briefings. The CorDis US sub-corpus, in contrast, shares more or less the same topic of the *WHB0105* corpus; therefore, most keywords obtained in this case have to do with what is said and done in the briefings. These two keywords lists thus provide two different, but both interesting perspectives for the identification of salient items in the *WHB0105* corpus.

1.7 Reporting voices in the briefings

The first part of data analysis focuses on the strategic use of reported discourse on the part of both press secretary and reporters in the briefings. These briefings are mostly a matter of providing official presidential or administration comments on events or issues, or explaining previous statements, decisions, actions and policies, when prompted by reporters. Reporting people’s statements and opinions is thus a fundamental aspect of the briefings, and specific reporting strategies are likely to emerge from the analysis of the press secretary’s and reporters’ discourse in the briefings. Therefore, I devote this section of my dissertation to the exploration of the way reported discourse is exploited in the briefings, and I limit my analysis to the reporting of statements, rather than of opinions and beliefs.

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4 The classification of verbs into semantic domains follows Biber et al. (1999: 360-374)
5 The CorDis (Corpora and Discourse: A quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of political and media discourse on the conflict in Iraq in 2003) was a national research project involving research groups in four Italian universities, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research through the PRIN 2006-2007 program and coordinated by prof. John Morley (University of Siena).
As Partington points out (2003: 30), press briefings are a type of institutional talk, which, in Habermas’ terms, can be regarded as an instance of strategic discourse. The Habermasian theory of communication, as reported by Chilton (2004: 28; 45) holds that most language use is strategic.

One of the “strategic functions’ that linguistic expressions of various types may be (perceived to be) used for”, as outlined by Chilton (2004: 46-47), is legitimisation/delegitimisation. Through legitimization, political actors establish the conditions by which they come to be regarded as authoritative, and one of the one ways they achieve legitimisation is “self-identification as a source of authority, reason, vision and sanity, where the self is either an individual or the group with which an individual identifies or wishes to identify” (Chilton 2004: 47).

In the specific case of the White House press secretary, their authoritativeness in their professional role – the official representative of a number of clients, including the President, the administration, the White House staff, the American people – depends on their ability to present themselves as providing reliable and truthful information on behalf of their clients. On the other hand, when asking a question to the press secretary, reporters generally need to make reference to pieces of information that constitute the basis for their question, and that they necessarily have to claim to be true.

As Chilton observes, “political speakers have to guard against the operation of their audience’s ‘cheater detectors’ and provide guarantees for the truth of their sayings” (2004: 23), and such guarantees are often obtained through reference to a source, depending on whose authoritativness the credibility of the embedded statement – and, consequently, of the speaker – may be enhanced or diminished (Chilton 2004: 22). In van Leeuwen’s framework (2007: 94-95), personal authority legitimation is realized by using a “‘verbal process’ clause (Halliday, 1985: 129) in which the ‘projected clause’, the authority’s utterance, contains some form of obligation modality”, while “expert legitimisation takes the form of ‘verbal process clauses’ or ‘mental process clauses’ with the expert as subject”.

Thus, one of the discourse strategies that can be adopted by speakers – and by political speakers in particular – in order to construct themselves as sources of authority involves the linguistic representation of other people’s thoughts or utterances, that is, the reporting of what other people say or think, and I attempt to investigate whether press secretary and reporters actually use reported discourse as a way of achieving legitimisation as authoritative sources.

To this purpose, I investigate the way reported discourse is exploited by press secretary and reporters in the briefings throughout the corpus, by focusing in particular on:
• the strategic function of the reported statement in the context of the exchange;
• the semantic value of reporting verbs used in different contexts;
• the selection of specific sources of statements.

Throughout this investigation, I compare the use of reporting verbs in the discourse of reporters and of the press secretary, as well as in the discourse of different press secretaries. Furthermore, I examine the use of reporting verbs in different phases of the briefings, so as to be able to detect and explore trends related to the succession of political phases.

The list of verbs to be examined has been obtained by selecting all the verbs that are listed in Sinclair as being used to report what people say (1990: 315), only if they can be followed by a that-clause (1990: 321). I analyzed them only if they occurred at least 25 times as reporting verbs in the corpus. To these I have added a number of reporting verbs that are not found in Sinclair’s list, but are included in the corpus’ keyword list. The list of verbs examined therefore includes: acknowledge; add; admit; agree; allege; announce; answer; anticipate; argue; assert; assure; boast; claim; clarify, comment; complain; confirm; convince; deny; dispute; explain; guarantee; imply; indicate; inform;
I examined each of these verbs individually, by looking at both quantitative (collocates and clusters) and qualitative data (whole sentences examined in the context of the exchange), and I have taken them into consideration only they were actually used as reporting verbs, and followed by a that-clause or by an object that may be transformed in a that-clause.

Before moving on to this analysis, however, I decided to have a look at some general frequency data for the whole WHB0105 corpus, which may be of use in carrying out the subsequent investigations. Although mere frequency data are of limited use in themselves, as their observation might lead to oversimplified conclusions, nevertheless they can help the researcher to identify aspects of a corpus that, while in need of further investigation (Baker 2006: 47; 68), highlight trends, outstanding word frequencies but also significant absences.

Thus, as this part of my dissertation is mainly concerned with finding out who is being quoted in the briefings and with what purposes, I have examined the dispersion, throughout the corpus, of some words that are likely to be used to refer to the main actors in the briefings: President (the press secretary’s boss), administration (the press secretary’s other main client), we (inclusive or exclusive, may refer to press secretary and press, to the Bush administration, to the White House staff, to the American people, to the United States, the White House press corps and so on), I (the press secretary as an individual – only examined in the press secretary’s words) and you (only when used by reporters).

What these data show is that the numerous occurrences of president are not evenly distributed throughout the five chronological phases in which the corpus is divided. At the beginning of the Bush administration, indeed, the president is referred to in the briefings much more frequently than in later years. In particular, this is due to a dramatic decrease in the occurrences of president in the press secretary’s words, especially when Scott McClellan replaced Ari Fleischer as press secretary, after Iraq had been invaded – a decrease which does not correspond to a similar decrease in the reporters’ words. On the other hand, a significant increase in the occurrences of I and we in the press secretary’s words is observed in the latter phases of the corpus, which suggests that the emphasis on the president as the pivot of the White House communications has been reduced.

The existence of these trends has been confirmed by further analyses conducted throughout the corpus. The data regarding the use of reporting verbs indicate that metarepresentation is a fundamental aspect in the discourse strategy of the White House Press Secretary. Reported discourse is extensively used by the press secretary in order to present statements characterized by a high truth-value, in response to challenges to the truthfulness of something that has been said. Reporters, in contrast, tend to use reported discourse either in order to highlight inconsistencies between statements made by different people at the White House or by the same person – the press secretary, the president himself – at different times, or in order to ask the press secretary to clarify some aspects of what has been said, or, finally, to remind the press secretary about previous statements and highlight coherence or incoherence with current statements.

Furthermore, significant differences have been highlighted in the discourse strategies adopted by the two press secretaries during George W. Bush’s first term as president and, consequently, in the identity constructed by each of them in that professional role. While the first of the two, Ari Fleischer, tended to present himself mainly as the representative of the President, especially in the early days of the George W. Bush era, Scott McClellan tended to seek legitimization by making reference to his own previous statements or to statements by other members of the administration, rather than merely quoting the President as the authoritative source par excellence.

The two press secretaries can thus be seen as having tailored different roles for themselves –
while Fleischer mainly based his own legitimacy on the authoritativeness of the President, whom the Press Secretary officially represents, McClellan – maybe also due to George W. Bush’s loss of credibility after the invasion of Iraq – chose to present himself as a press secretary who mainly represents an authority in his own right.

1.8 Strategic use of political discourse keywords

In the second part of this dissertation, I explore the way a number of lexical items identified as corpus keywords (in the keywords list derived by comparing the WHB0105 corpus and the BNC spoken) and typically used in the jargon of political communication are exploited by the press secretary in relation to specific topics and in the perspective of achieving specific political goals. The words selected for investigation are message/messages, priority/priorities, importance/important, clear, all of which are found in the corpus keywords list.

Messages, as Lilleker (2006: 122-123) observes, “are of central importance to any form of political communication”; they are used “to convey information and to persuade the receiver to act in a certain way or to believe certain things”. The investigation of the use of the word message in its singular and plural form in the WHB0105 corpus revealed some interesting facts. Most occurrences of message(s) refer to messages sent by the US – often by the president himself – to America’s opponents. The topic of these messages is, generally, the request on the part of the US administration that their enemies change their attitude in order to improve their situation. The underlying message is, thus, more similar to a threat than to a neutral communicative act. Concordancing the whole corpus for the word threat immediately shows, indeed, that this word is never used by the White House to describe their own actions, although they often do threaten countries with negative consequences in case these countries should not change their behavior. Indeed, the word threat in the corpus is used to refer to the threat someone else (generally, Saddam Hussein or terrorist organizations) poses to the world. The idea of threat posed by the US can thus be said to be expressed in another way, that is, by using the word message, often accompanied by adjectives and verbs that create an impression of shifting responsibility away from the White House for what has just been stated, either because emphasis is placed on the receiver’s responsibility for understanding the message and acting in consequence, or because the content of the message is expressed in such a way as though it were descending from a superior moral entity of unspecified nature. Moreover, these messages are repeatedly described as unambiguous, by using various adjectives and phrases such as loud and clear, clear and consistent. However, ambiguity in the content of the message often emerges, and it can even be detected in the lack of clarity about who the sender and receiver of the message are. Indeed, various linguistic structures often overlap in the same clause, so as to create ambiguity about senders and receivers.

Such words as priorities and important/importance are likely to be related to another key concept in political communication: agenda-setting, a process that Dearing and Rogers (1996: 1-2) define as “an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites”. The briefings, as Perloff (1998: 68) observes, “give the president a mechanism to provide spin on current events and, hopefully, to set the agenda for the day’s news”. Not surprisingly, then, words referring to the salience of issues on the public, policy and news agenda are significantly frequent in this corpus. However, occurrences of priority, priorities, importance and important are found to be unevenly distributed in the corpus. They are indeed most frequent in the last phase of Bush’s first term as president – in particular, in the words of Scott McClellan, Bush’s second press secretary – and much more rarely found in the critical phases in which the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq took place.
Priority and priorities are generally preceded by such adjectives and phrases as high, highest, big, biggest, key, vital, lower, serious, important, top, number one through which the salience of issues on the agenda is graded. During the first phase of the Bush administration, the debate about priorities mainly regarded the key issues of Bush’s first presidential campaign: energy and education reforms, tax cut, patients’ bill of rights, all of which regard domestic policy. Later on, the top priorities for the White House became the victory in the war on terrorism, strengthening the economy and protecting the homeland – a pattern that occurs about 40 times in the last of the five phases in which the corpus is subdivided. By emphasizing these priorities, the press secretary attempts to shift reporters’ attention away from other issues, which, at the moment, are not on the presidential agenda.

The use of important and importance in the briefings appears to follow strategies similar to the ones employed in the use of priority/ies. Both the adjective and the noun are mostly used by the press secretary. Important either precedes such nouns as priority, priorities, principle(s), issue(s), topic, which refer to the salience of issues on the agenda, or nouns emphasizing the successes of this presidency, such as step(s), progress, successes, accomplishment, improvements. While the first type of pattern is more evenly distributed throughout the corpus, the second type is concentrated in the post-Iraq invasion phase. Furthermore, important is also frequently found in such patterns as “it is important for somebody to do something” or “it is important that somebody does something”; in this case, the underlying meaning is more similar to the one identified in the case of message: a euphemism for a threat. Importance, on the other hand, is mainly found in such patterns as “the president talked about / discussed / stressed the importance of something”. Through such structures, the press secretary presents the president as the guarantee of the salience of an issue.

Lastly, clear, which is one of the most frequent adjectives in the corpus. More than one third of its occurrences are pre-modified by very or by other intensifying adverbs. The list of nouns that collocate with clear shows that the emphasis is not only on clear communication strategies but also on the clarity of the US administration’s policies – that is, on the administration’s coherence. This list indeed includes a number of nouns which can roughly be classified as referring to policy, decision-making and plans for the future: choice(s), principles, strategy, priorities, vision, guidelines, agenda, objectives, plan. Another set of nouns found in the collocate list includes communication-related words: message, understanding, signal, indication. Thus the use of clear with reference to a communicative act is less frequent than its use in the description of a political plan. However, as Baker (2006: 84) suggests, the observation of a concordance should not be limited to the most immediately emerging patterns or to groups of collocates. At this point, “analyzing the remainder” might make it easier to identify other less evident patterns. Therefore, after removing the aforementioned nouns from the list, some of the remaining ones can be further grouped into a set, in which the meaning of clear appears closer to ‘evident’ rather than ‘straightforward’. These nouns include: difference(s), violation, sign, results, conclusion, contrasts, victor.

Through these analyses, which are conducted at a much deeper level in my dissertation, I attempt to demonstrate how the use of specific lexical items and grammatical as well as syntactic structures plays a prominent role in White House communication strategies. I regard these as interesting examples of how invisible discourse strategies in political and media discourse are worth exploring by combining corpus tools and techniques and the discourse-analytical approach.

References


The second research question aims to find out if, indeed, students who study in the morning have better quiz scores as what the review of the literature suggests. Thus, the latter is directional. A helpful video tutorial in developing a research question. Research Outcome Number 3. Find out correlations or relationships between variables. The outcome of research questions in this category will be to explain correlations or causality. Note that in all the preceding examples of research questions, the variables of the study found in the conceptual framework are integrated. Therefore, research questions must always incorporate the variables in them so that the researcher can describe, find differences, or correlate them with each other. Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: creating the blueprint for your â€œHouseâ€. Cynthia Grant, PhD. University of Colorado-Denver. Azadeh Osanloo, PhD. New Mexico State University. The theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects in the research process, yet is often misunderstood by doctoral candidates as they prepare their dissertation research study. The importance of theory-driven thinking and acting is emphasized in relation to the selection of a topic, the development of research questions, the conceptualization of the li