Sentence stress in presidential speeches

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English phrasal stress is rule-governed, but variable. A sentence like

(1) the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone
    (F.D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933, Sentence 19)

can be performed with different stress contours. Both the regularities and
the variation require an explanation. We explore the view that regularities in
phrasal stress come from stress rules such as the Nuclear Stress Rule and the
Compound Stress Rule that operate on syntactic structures (received wisdom),
while variability partly depends on ambiguity at the level of lexical phonol-
ogy (new proposal). For example, words like in may or may not be lexically
stressed. Since phrasal stress is a function of lexical stresses and their mode of
combination, variation results.

On the empirical side, we report on our ongoing study of rhythm in pres-
idential speeches. Building on data made available by the American Presi-
dency Project (Peters and Woolley 1999-2017), syntactic analysis by the Stan-
ford Parser (Chen and Manning 2014), automatic metrical analysis by Metri-
calTree (Dozat 2015), and native speaker stress judgments collected using the
web application MetricGold (Shapiro 2016) we compare the theoretically pre-
dicted stress patterns to the actually experienced stress patterns, exploring
the interaction of stress, lexical frequency, and syntactic linearization. In par-
ticular, we consider the hypothesis that informative words tend to be placed in
positions where they are highlighted by phrasal stress (Bolinger 1972, Cohen
Priva 2012).

References: • Bolinger, D. (1972): Accent is predictable (if you’re a mind reader). Language 48:
sity.