Unnatural acts lead to unconsummated marriages: Discourses of homosexuality within the House of Lords revisited

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1   Introduction

- Baker (2004): corpus analysis of House of Lords debates between 1998–2000 around age of consent legislation.

- In 2013, the House of Lords debated the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the UK. This study looks at that debate using Baker's methodology.

- Overall picture: the hegemonic status of discourses of equality and 'tolerance' means that the supporters of same-sex marriage can articulate their position in a simpler and more coherent way than those opposed.

2   Data

- House of Lords = very specific/particular community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992).

  Not representative of wider society, but still useful:

  - Members of the House of Lords must draw on discourses which *do* circulate in the wider social world in order to make arguments intelligible and convincing.

– Pragmatic considerations: large, easily available electronic corpus.

- Keywords analysis:
  - Keyword = "any word which is found to be outstanding in its frequency in the text" (Scott 1999).[1]
  - Can be seen as "lexical signposts" (Baker 2004: 90), which guide the discourse analyst.

  Either compare a single corpus to a larger, 'benchmark' corpus, or compare two smaller corpora with each other.

  - Speeches in favour of marriage reform vs. speeches opposed.

  AntConc (Anthony 2011) used to generate two lists of keywords for the supporters and opponents of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill.

- The forty-six keywords (twenty-one for and twenty-five against) are presented in Tables 1 (p. 3) and 2 (p. 4).

3 Discourses of homosexuality

3.1 Supporters of the Bill: a classical liberal discourse of freedom

- Emphasises a particular model of freedom:[2]
  - The 'harm principle' (Mill 1859): "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his [*sic.*] will, is to prevent harm to others".

- Signalled by several of the supporters' keywords: they are interested in *allowing* LGBT people the freedom to be *able* to exercise the same rights as others.

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[1]Keywords are generated by first cross-tabulating the frequencies of all lexical items against each other and against the total word-length of each corpus, then performing a log-likelihood test on the frequency of each lexical item. A word is classed as 'key' if it appears unusually frequently in one text as compared with the other (following Baker, I set the definition of 'unusually' at p < 0.0005, which corresponds to a keyness (log-likelihood) score of 12.1157).

[2]Although not a keyword by our criteria, the word *freedom* itself has a relatively high keyness score of 12.0 in the supporters' speeches.

Word	Frequency in supporters' speeches	Frequency in opponents' speeches	Level of keyness
gay	160 (2.99)	40 (0.86)	61.3
their	245 (4.58)	114 (2.45)	32.4
religious	114 (2.13)	33 (0.71)	23.1
couples	181 (3.38)	88 (1.89)	21.2
to	1858 (34.74)	1377 (29.60)	20.4
allowing	16 (0.30)	0 (0.00)	20.0
our	174 (3.25)	87 (1.87)	18.7
wales	28 (0.52)	4 (0.09)	17.1
noble	375 (7.01)	233 (5.01)	16.6
changed	48 (0.90)	14 (0.30)	15.3
marry	65 (1.22)	24 (0.52)	14.3
women	54 (1.01)	18 (0.39)	14.2
lesbian	36 (0.67)	9 (0.19)	13.8
listen	11 (0.21)	0 (0.00)	13.8
who	254 (4.75)	152 (3.27)	13.6
love	69 (1.29)	27 (0.58)	13.6
amendments	49 (0.92)	16 (0.34)	13.3
protections	24 (0.45)	4 (0.09)	13.2
able	43 (0.80)	13 (0.28)	13.0
want	101 (1.89)	48 (1.03)	12.6
trans	10 (0.19)	0 (0.00)	12.5

Table 1: Keywords in the supporters' speeches. Numbers in brackets are frequencies per 1000 words.

Word	Frequency in opponents' speeches	Frequency in supporters' speeches	Level of keyness
you	89 (1.91)	34 (0.64)	33.8
been	232 (4.99)	158 (2.95)	26.4
meaning	40 (0.86)	9 (0.17)	25.8
consultation	34 (0.73)	7 (0.13)	23.3
between	127 (2.73)	75 (1.40)	21.8
government	114 (2.45)	69 (1.29)	18.4
process	29 (0.62)	7 (0.13)	17.7
difference	42 (0.90)	15 (0.28)	17.4
law	120 (2.58)	77 (1.44)	16.4
being	87 (1.87)	50 (0.93)	15.9
written	14 (0.30)	1 (0.02)	15.3
deep	19 (0.41)	3 (0.06)	15.3
consequences	28 (0.60)	8 (0.15)	14.7
there	237 (5.09)	188 (3.52)	14.6
can	139 (2.99)	98 (1.83)	14.0
proposed	20 (0.43)	4 (0.07)	14.0
war	13 (0.28)	1 (0.02)	13.9
redefining	9 (0.19)	0 (0.00)	13.8
consummation	15 (0.32)	2 (0.04)	13.1
has	283 (6.08)	237 (4.43)	13.0
implications	12 (0.26)	1 (0.02)	12.6
complementarity	8 (0.17)	0 (0.00)	12.2
employment	8 (0.17)	0 (0.00)	12.2
referendum	8 (0.17)	0 (0.00)	12.2
a	1115 (23.97)	1105 (20.66)	12.2

Table 2: Keywords in the opponents' speeches. Numbers in brackets are frequencies per 1000 words.

> We also believe that human beings are created with the need to seek out and look for a helpmeet in life. That person could be of the same sex, or not. Whichever it is, they deserve the right to be able to create a life together permanently and to celebrate it in marriage.
>
> > Baroness Neuberger, 3 June 2013

But at the same time, it is vital to ensure adequate *protections* (especially for *religious* groups), thus ensuring that the harm principle is satisfied.

> [...] I want to be clear from the outset that this Bill is not just about allowing same-sex couples to marry; it is also about protecting and promoting religious freedom.
>
> > Baroness Stowell of Beeston, 3 June 2013

- This liberal discourse is *hegemonic* in the UK, and among (all?) Western democracies, i.e. it has achieved cultural dominance (especially through general acceptance rather than forced imposition).

  This means the supporters of the Bill are in the position of 'speaking from power': hegemonic discourses are normative.

3.2 Opponents of the Bill

3.2.1 Due process

- Keywords: *consultation, process, referendum, government.*

  > My Lords, as I have studied the development of this Bill thus far, I have been profoundly alarmed by the violations of constitutional due process that seem to have accompanied it at every turn.
  >
  > > Lord Browne of Belmont, 3 June 2013

- Deflection of homophobia.

  > To take a position that is not in support of this Bill is not to be homophobic, although some might accuse us of it.
  >
  > > Baroness O'Loan, 4 June 2013

- Cross-faction consensus.

  > Regardless of our views on same-sex marriage, I think that we
  > would all agree that the consultation on the introduction of same-
  > sex marriage has been seriously deficient.
  >
  > <div align="right">Lord Browne of Belmont, 4 June 2013</div>

- Counters affective appeals to *love* (a keyword for the supporters). Op-
  ponents are detached, unsentimental statesmen.

  > Some argue, as we have just heard from the noble Lord, that love
  > between any two people is a decisive consideration: "amor vincit
  > omnia". However, love is not everything. The law of marriage
  > discriminates on grounds of age and affinity: you cannot marry a
  > parent, sibling or child, or marry someone who is already married.
  > Why exclude these categories in the new definition?
  >
  > <div align="right">Lord Anderson of Swansea, 4 June 2013</div>

3.2.2   Slippery slope

- Unintended and (supposedly) undesirable *consequences* or *implications*.

  > My noble friend Lord Dear and others have pointed out the con-
  > stitutional and procedural defects of this Bill, so I will not repeat
  > them. I do however agree with those who have identified unin-
  > tended and unanticipated consequences.
  >
  > <div align="right">Lord Hylton, 3 June 2013</div>

- Disrupts supporters' claims that this change is small and innocuous.
  - Not small: Lord Dear: "the Government had admitted that the
    impact on existing legislation would require at least 8,000 amend-
    ments".
  - Not innocuous (keyword: *employment*):
    > I should like to bring to the noble Baroness's attention the
    > case of Adrian Smith, the housing officer who was demoted by
    > a housing authority for expressing the view [. . .] that same-
    > sex marriage was an equality too far; and to that of Brian
    > Ross, the police chaplain who was forced out of his job for
    > stating his opposition to the same-sex marriage proposals.
    >
    > <div align="right">Baroness Cumberledge, 17 June 2013</div>

3.2.3 Linguistic rigidity

- Popular belief about meaning and language: meanings of words are in some sense immutable; language ought not to change at all.
    - In keeping with generally conservative outlook: change = corruption, not innovation.

- Keywords: *meaning* and *redefining.*

- Commitment to etymological purity → forced to espouse rather peculiar beliefs:

    > Marriage in the Jewish tradition was considered to be a blood covenant. They used to keep the bed sheets as proof that the covenant had been satisfied. It is a physical impossibility in a same-sex relationship for the reproductive organs to be joined together, and therefore whatever we seek to call it, it cannot be a marriage in the traditional sense. In fact, it changes the nature and meaning of marriage.
    >
    > Lord Edmiston, 3 June 2013

- On the debate about same-sex marriage 'redefining marriage', see McConnell-Ginet (2006).

- Linguistic conservatism linked to other normative discourses: especially, in this case, heteronormativity.
    - Ignores the fact that non-normative practices and identities are often erased *through* discourse (especially through their *absence* from discourse).
    - Present state of affairs is not some neutral linguistic artefact, but a product of heteronormative ideology.

- Maintaining the status quo is just as much of a political act as changing it: but opponents ignore this and appeal to spurious notions of the "natural and normal" meaning of words (Lord Tebbit, 3 June).

3.2.4 Complementarity of the sexes

- Also relies heavily on heteronormative ideas of 'naturalness'.

> [T]he heart of marriage features both the complementarity as well as the difference between men and women.
>
> Lord Glenarthur, 4 June 2013

- Since the supporters' argument is framed in terms of equality, the opponents emphasise perceived *difference*, especially in terms of *complementarity*.

- Keyword: *consummation*:

  > [M]arriage is not completed in the marriage ceremony, wherever that may take place. Marriage must also be consummated—completed—in the sexual union of male and female, and is voidable if it has not been consummated. However, with the marriage of two people of the same sex, the proposed law says that these provisions do not apply. Where is the equality in that?
  >
  > The Lord Bishop of Exeter, 3 June 2013

- On-record complaint: no legal definition of consummation or adultery for same-sex couples.

- Disproportionate focus of opponents on sexual acts of same-sex couples (*consummation* mentioned 15 times versus twice in supporters' speeches; *adultery* mentioned 15 times as opposed to 6).

- Since marriage, consummation, and procreation are all presented as interdependent, the frequent highlighting of the fact that same-sex couples are *incapable* of the last two (by the chosen definitions) serves to imply that they are *by nature* incapable of the first.

- Such appeals to naturalness also access a discourse which sees homosexual sex as *un*natural, and therefore LGBT people as deviant. This diminishes their legitimacy as members of society, which reduces the perceived obligation to allow them access to privileged social institutions such as marriage.

4 Conclusions

- Interesting parallel with Baker's findings: pro-reformers are straightforward in their approach while anti-reformers have a more nuanced and

complex chain of argumentation, along with a strategy for avoiding accusations of homophobia.

- Is this a general trend? Possible explanation:
  - Pro-reformers frame their arguments as being from within a liberal discourse. This is hegemonic, which means that the rhetorical burden of proof lies with their opponents.
  - Also: no obvious single candidate for a popular countervailing discourse.
  - Appeal to (implicit) homophobia is vital for some of the opponents' arguments, but they must still position themselves as not being homophobic in deference to the hegemonic position.

- Homophobic discourse is difficult to articulate coherently or concisely (to an audience which is not already sympathetic).

- Dependent on cultural/discursive norms: in other societies, the liberal point of view is not hegemonic, and so homophobic discourses can be articulated much more clearly (cf. Uganda).

- Backed into a corner ≠ defeated.

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