

# Unnatural acts lead to unconsummated marriages: discourses of homosexuality within the House of Lords debate on same-sex marriage<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In June and July 2013, the UK House of Lords debated, and ultimately accepted, a Bill to legalise same-sex marriage. Following the model of Baker's (2004) work on a set of earlier Lords debates relating to homosexuality, this study uses a corpus-based keywords analysis to assess the main lexical differences between those arguing in favour and those arguing against a change to the marriage laws. In so doing, it sheds light on the ways in which discourses relating to homosexuality are constructed and accessed by the Lords. In general, it is shown that supporters of reform take advantage of their hegemonic liberal position to construct a simple line of argument in contrast to the opponents, who are forced to use more subtle and elaborate lines of reasoning by the limited discursive space available to those espousing anti-LGBT sentiments.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, marriage, homosexuality, politics

## 1. Introduction

In his article, 'Unnatural Acts', Baker (2004) examines the discourses used in several debates in the UK House of Lords between 1998 and 2000 over legislation which sought to change the age of consent for homosexual sex to 16, in keeping with the law for heterosexual sex. My intention in this paper is to replicate Baker's corpus-based methodology in order to analyse a more recent debate in the Lords involving homosexuality, this time about same-sex marriage. This will bear fruit in its own right, but also offers a chance for comparison, to see whether the discourses accessed by the Lords<sup>2</sup> in debating homosexuality remain the same after more than ten years of fairly dramatic legal and social change in the UK regarding LGBT people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Following convention, I will refer to members of the house of Lords generically as *Lords*, although I regret the erasure of female members that this effects.

<sup>3</sup>LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and is perhaps the most 'neutral' way in modern egalitarian/advocacy discourse of referring to a diverse group of people with non-normative sexualities and/or gender presentations.

It is to be noted that I am not claiming that the discourses or attitudes of the House of Lords are necessarily representative, in any straightforward, one-to-one sense, of wider public sentiment; but equally, the Lords must draw on discourses which *do* circulate in the wider social world in order to make their arguments intelligible and convincing. Communities of Practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992; Lave & Wenger 1991) cannot conjure discourses *ex nihilo*, and so even if those which they use are not the dominant discourses in society, they are nonetheless present. As Cameron (2001: 15) puts it: “When people talk about shopping, or drugs, or the royal family, what they say will be drawn from the community’s repertoire of things that it is possible to say rather than representing some unique perspective on the topic.”

This paper begins by introducing some background information on same-sex marriage in the UK and on the role of the House of Lords. After this, Section 3 provides reflections on the notion of ‘discourse’ as I will be using it in this paper. Section 4 looks at some relevant existing literature. In Sections 5 and 6, I describe the corpus I will be working with, and how ‘keywords’ can be used in discourse studies of this sort. We then move on in Section 7 to the various discourses which can be identified in the debates, and how these relate both to each other and to Baker’s earlier findings. Lastly, discussion and conclusions are offered in the final two sections.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Same-sex marriage in the UK

Legal recognition of same-sex unions has existed in England and Wales since 2005, after the Civil Partnership Act 2004 was passed the previous year. This offered same-sex couples the chance to enter into a ‘civil partnership’, with most of the rights and responsibilities afforded to opposite-sex couples who were married. However, there were (and are) still legal discrepancies between the two institutions,<sup>4</sup> as well as the important symbolic distinction between marriage and ‘mere’ civil partnership—a contrast which LGBT rights campaigner Peter Tatchell went so far as to describe as a form of “sexual apartheid” (Tatchell 2009)—and so there continued to be pressure from civil rights groups such as Stonewall for a move to full marriage for same-sex couples.

Only one of the three main UK political parties (the Liberal Democrats) included same-sex marriage as a manifesto pledge before the 2010 general election; however, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government which emerged from that election did ultimately make moves to introduce marriage reform legislation. On 17 September 2011, Lynne Featherstone, the Equalities Minister, announced to the Liberal Democrat Party Conference that a formal consultation on “how to implement equal civil marriage for same sex couples” was to begin in March 2012.<sup>5</sup> Following the results of this consultation, on 24 January 2013, the Government intro-

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<sup>4</sup>The London-based law firm Alternative Family Law discuss several of them in this video:

<http://youtu.be/vT6I72W9SMM>. Examples include the way pension payments are calculated for the surviving partner in the event that one partner dies, as well as problems of legal recognition in countries like Portugal, which recognise same-sex marriage, but not civil partnerships.

<sup>5</sup>Full speech available online from

[http://www.libdems.org.uk/lynne\\_featherstone\\_s\\_speech\\_to\\_liberal\\_democrat\\_autumn\\_conference](http://www.libdems.org.uk/lynne_featherstone_s_speech_to_liberal_democrat_autumn_conference).

duced the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill, which sought to legalise same-sex marriage in England and Wales.<sup>6</sup> On 5 February it passed its second reading in the House of Commons (on a free vote) with a majority of 400–175, and ultimately passed its third reading on 21 May by 366 votes to 161; it was given its first reading in the House of Lords the same day.<sup>7</sup> On 3–4 June, it was debated in the House of Lords, before ultimately passing its second reading after a ‘wrecking amendment’ (an amendment with the effect of rejecting the Bill) was defeated. Eventually, the Bill received its third reading in the House of Lords on 15 July, and became law on 17 July after it was granted royal assent. The first same-sex marriages in the UK took place on 29 March 2014.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2 The House of Lords

The House of Lords is the upper chamber in the UK’s bicameral system, and is made up of unelected peers, who serve for life. Some members are appointed by the government, some inherit their positions, and some hold it *ex officio* (in the case of the Lords Spiritual, for example, who hold their seats by virtue of being bishops of the Church of England). Its primary role is to scrutinise legislation: it “examines and revises bills from the [House of] Commons” (House of Lords 2011: 2), with the aim of “making and shaping laws and checking and challenging the government” (House of Lords 2011: 1).<sup>9</sup> It has generally been a relatively conservative institution, especially when it comes to LGBT rights: for example, proposals from the House of Commons (the lower chamber) to equalise age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual sex, and to repeal the much-protested Section 28 (a part of the Local Government Act 1988 which prohibited the “promotion” of homosexuality by local authorities, and had the effect of preventing discussion of homosexuality in schools), were initially rejected by the House of Lords, and their passage was thereby delayed by many years. In the present debate, on same-sex marriage, we also see spirited opposition; however, in this instance the Lords ultimately supported the Bill. In fact, this time the support from the Lords was impressively strong: 390 Lords voted against the aforementioned wrecking amendment, essentially in favour of the Bill, with only 148 voting for it.

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<sup>6</sup>Since marriage in the UK is a devolved issue, the legislation does not have an effect in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Movements for same-sex marriage elsewhere in the UK have had mixed success. The Marriage and Civil Partnerships Bill (Scotland) was introduced to the Scottish Parliament on 27 June 2013, and ultimately passed on 4 February 2014 with 105 votes to 18. (On the passage of Bills through the Scottish Parliament, see [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3\\_Bills/gpb-AnnexE.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3_Bills/gpb-AnnexE.pdf).) In Northern Ireland, however, a motion to introduce same-sex marriage legislation has been rejected three times, most recently on 29 April 2014.

<sup>7</sup>For more on the progression of Bills through the UK Parliament, see Rogers & Walters (2006) and House of Commons (2013).

<sup>8</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/306000/140423\\_M\\_SSC\\_Act\\_factsheet\\_web\\_version\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/306000/140423_M_SSC_Act_factsheet_web_version_.pdf).

<sup>9</sup>See House of Lords (2011) more generally, as well as Shell (2007), on the role of the House of Lords.

### 3. On the notion of ‘discourse’

The word ‘discourse’ has been employed in multiple ways, and so in this section I wish to provide some clarity on my own usage. The concept of discourse in the sense intended in this paper comes ultimately from Foucault, who describes discourses as “practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972 [1969]: 49). Discourses need not be linguistic, but language is perhaps the most important contributor to discourse, and it is the language of the Lords debate that I will be examining here. In this sense, the notion of discourse perhaps owes something to Austin (1962) and the idea that language does not merely describe the world around us, but can in fact alter it. Post-structuralist critical theory merely takes us one step further: not only can language alter the world, but it can actually construct it. Barker (2003: 102) describes the situation as follows: “Material objects and social practice ‘exist’ outside of language. However, they are given meaning or ‘brought into view’ by language and are thus discursively formed.”

Discourses can thus give people “a framework for their everyday experience”, but, crucially, can also “act as a form of social control” (Baker 2008: 92, paraphrasing Burr 1995). This focus on “relations of power” (Sunderland 2004: 6) is central to the notion of discourse I am interested in here. LGBT people being a historically marginalised group, discourses surrounding homosexuality often construct it as a dangerous, alien concept, anathema to ‘normal’ society, and therefore as something to be suppressed. We shall see the relevance of these associations in much of the discussion below.

A final point to note is that any act of identifying or defining a discourse is “always interpretive” (Sunderland 2004: 3). Multiple readings of the same data will be possible, and in fact inevitable if we subscribe to the post-structuralist idea that multiple interpretations of any sign are possible in different contexts. Baker (2008: 94) cautions us that “[w]here I see one discourse, you may see a different discourse or no discourse at all. Our identification of particular discourses is going to be based on the discourses that we already (often unconsciously) live with”. This means that my own personal perspectives will have shaped, directed, and informed the way in which I identify and discuss the discourses presented below. This is not to say, however, that the discourses I see are only apparent to me, or that discourse analysis in general is a purely personal affair. The discourses I describe should be discernible by other observers, since the “linguistic traces” (Talbot 2010) of each discourse which I identify and use to guide my analysis “form a systematic and coherent set of ideas” (Bachmann 2011: 81), and are therefore isolable as an intelligible whole, *viz.* what we call a discourse.

### 4. Literature review

A number of recent pieces of work have addressed discourses surrounding same-sex relationships, including marriage, both in the media and in the UK Parliament. In this section, I examine a selection of pertinent work.

Baker (2004) examined the debate in the House of Lords surrounding equalisation of the age of consent for anal sex. He found that those who argued in favour of equalisation accessed discourses which portrayed gay people in terms of their identity rather than their behaviour, and argued largely from the standpoint of

equality and tolerance. Those opposed to the move made use of oftentimes quite explicitly homophobic discourses, constructing gay male sex in terms of criminality, unnaturalness, and danger to society. He also highlighted a ‘thin end of the wedge’ discourse, whereby, it is argued, the granting of some rights/concessions to LGBT people will only lead to more being demanded in the future.

The present study replicates much of Baker’s methodology, but owing to the subject matter there is one crucial difference between the datasets: the debate examined by Baker (2004) was about the *male* age of consent, and so necessarily only gay men were under discussion (although the apparent danger to young girls was also a focus of the opponents), whereas in the same-sex marriage debate, lesbians and bisexual women are of course included.<sup>10</sup>

The passage of the Civil Partnership Act 2004 offered another opportunity to examine parliamentary debate around same-sex relations, this time in the context of legal union. Bachmann (2011) took a corpus-driven approach to just this topic, examining transcripts of debates from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. His findings were more complex than Baker’s in the sense that he could not reliably attribute straightforward ‘for’ or ‘against’ stances to the debaters, instead identifying five different standpoints argued for in the debates. He therefore compared his corpus to a 4 million word reference corpus, BNC Baby, a subset of the British National Corpus (Aston & Burnard 1998), and identified keywords (a concept to be introduced below) used in the debates. These pointed the way to the discourses appealed to in constructing the various lines of argumentation used by the speakers. He identified many of the same discourses as Baker (2004), including a focus by those supportive of the Bill on equality, in this case inflected by an emphasis on the ‘sameness’ of gay and straight couples. Those critical of the proposals argued, on the contrary, that there were fundamental differences between these two groups, and that, in fact, gay couples were just one of many groups who were disadvantaged by not having their relationships recognised in law, such as live-in carers and their charges, or cohabiting spinsters. Notably, some of the more flagrantly homophobic discourses, those relating to unnaturalness or criminality, were absent, although Bachmann did also note the appearance of the ‘thin end of the wedge’ argument, as well as a discourse construing the Bill’s proposals as ‘detrimental to society’, perhaps akin to the ‘danger and ruin’ discourse identified by Baker (2004).

This theme of a retreat from explicit homophobia is picked up by Van der Bom, Coffey-Glover, Jones, Mills, & Paterson (2015) and Love & Baker (2015), who examine the role of *implicit* homophobia in discussions of same-sex marriage, the former in the media, the latter in parliamentary debate once again. Implicit, or ‘covert’ homophobia (Peterson 2011), where “speakers hint at, presuppose, or convey homophobic beliefs whilst also claiming they are not homophobic”, is “much more difficult to identify” (Van der Bom et al. 2015: 102) than explicit homophobia, and so may in the final account be more pernicious (a matter I return to in the conclusion of this paper).

Van der Bom et al. (2015) analyse the language used in several episodes of the BBC Radio 4 programme *The Moral Maze* about same-sex marriage. They find that the guests on the show eschew explicitly homophobic language, which would delegitimise them in contemporary society, since homophobic beliefs are socially censured, and instead display their homophobic stance implicitly. They do this through the use of ‘danger metaphors’, which suggest legalising same-sex marriage would have unintended consequences, or appeals to scientific discourses and notions

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<sup>10</sup>My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

of ‘naturalness’, which supposedly absolve the speaker of any personal bias, since they are then merely reporting apparently objective fact. Both of these techniques are also evident in the same-sex marriage debate examined in this paper.

Love & Baker (2015) compare the speeches of opponents of two Bills in the British Houses of Parliament, namely the age of consent debate examined by Baker (2004), and the same-sex marriage debate which is the topic of the present paper. They demonstrate that there have been changes in the way same-sex relationships are discussed in Parliament, with a marked decrease in explicit homophobic discourses in the later, same-sex marriage, debate, as compared with the earlier, age of consent, debate. By comparing the opponents’ speeches from both debates, they showed, for example, that ‘I’ was a keyword of the opponents in the age of consent debate as compared with the opponents in the same-sex marriage debate, and go on to demonstrate how this is because of an increased reluctance on the part of speakers in the same-sex marriage debate to go ‘on record’ with their anti-LGBT opinions and align their identities closely with the arguments they are putting forward. In the same-sex marriage debate, Love & Baker (2015) also identify discourses relating to procedure over substance (highlighting the inadequacies of the way the Bill has been introduced, rather than taking issue with its content), as well as religious freedoms (arguing that the Bill would impinge on them), discourses which we will return to in more detail below.

The overall trend in the literature appears to show that use of explicit homophobic argumentation has been decreasing steadily over time, with later debates, around same-sex marriage, seeing less of it than earlier ones around age of consent legislation or civil partnerships. In this paper I provide further confirmatory evidence that this is indeed the case, and that the discursive space available to those espousing anti-LGBT positions has been reduced in Western, liberal political discourse.

## 5. Data

The data I will be analysing consist of electronic transcripts of the second reading debate held on 3–4 June 2013, as well as a portion of the debate from the committee stage held on 17 June. Debate in the first part of the committee stage concerned what many Lords saw as a wrecking amendment in disguise, and so debate was still largely over whether the Bill should be passed. However, after this amendment was eventually withdrawn, the passage of the Bill was seen by most as a *fait accompli*, and so debate transitioned to more technical discussion over the legal and procedural details of the Bill. I have chosen therefore to disregard the debate from this point on (and so have not included material from the report stage or the third reading either), for two reasons. Firstly, by the nature of the discussion, discourses around homosexuality were no longer employed in such prominent ways, and since those are what I am interested in, there is less for me to say. Secondly, opposition is less trenchant and divided by this stage, and there is more of a collaborative effort to construct a better Bill (or to make the best of a bad job, for those opposed to its substance). Due to the nature of the keywords analysis (see below), this diminishment of distinctions between the two positions would make the technique I employ less effective and less revealing. In essence, I believe that the corpus I have selected constitutes, by and large, the entirety of the Lords debate on *whether* same-sex marriage should be implemented in the UK, although there is much subsequent debate

on *how* this should take place. For this reason, I believe it constitutes a coherent and meaningful text for analysis.

In total, the corpus contains 107,729 words.<sup>11</sup> Following Baker's (2004: 89) methodology, each contribution to the debate was annotated with a code of 1–4, depending on the position taken by the speaker with respect to marriage reform. At the end of the second day of debate, there was a vote on a wrecking amendment, so it was possible to assess whether speakers were supporters of the Bill (category 1) or opponents of it (category 2) by checking how they voted, as well as by reference to the content of their speeches, looking for remarks such as 'I (do not) support the Bill', or other, less explicit statements which clearly positioned the speaker in relation to the matter under debate. Category 3 was assigned to those speakers who were undecided or expressed their intention to abstain from the vote (this contains 6,685 words), while category 4 was used for contributions which were not related to the change in the law being debated (for example, procedural discussion, or points of information; this contains 1,042 words). The majority of the corpus contains texts either in favour or opposed to a change in the law regarding marriage; in total, the supporters' speeches make up 53,485 words, and the opponents', 46,517. A corpus-based analysis of these data was carried out in order to determine the major lexical differences between the two positions.

As Baker (2004: 90) advocates, I will also make use of a larger reference corpus, the British National Corpus (BNC; Aston & Burnard 1998; accessed via Davies 2004),<sup>12</sup> in order to determine more widespread patterns of language use, especially collocation patterns. This will be important in analysing the ways in which certain discourses are constructed: as listeners we are not simply recipients of a pre-figured message; as Grice and others point out (see e.g. Grice 1975; Sperber & Wilson 1986; Wilson & Sperber 2012), hearers are very active meaning makers, doing large amounts of inference work. For this reason, the notion of *semantic prosody* (Louw 1993; Sinclair 1991) or *semantic preference* (Stubbs 2001: 64–66) is crucial: what kinds of words a particular lexical item usually occurs with affects how we interpret it. Baker (2004: 96) demonstrates the case of the lemma COMMIT, which, in the BNC, frequently collocates with words such as *suicide*, *incest*, or *crimes*—in this way, when the Lords speak of *committing buggery* or, apparently more neutrally, *committing sexual intercourse*, they are in fact accessing a criminalising discourse which places homosexual sex acts in the same semantic field as *suicide*, *incest*, or *crimes*. Cameron (2003: 110–111) gives another example, that of the phrase *openly gay*. In the BNC, *openly* collocates strongly with negative words like *hostile*, *critical* or *aggressive*, which therefore figures *gay* in a similar, negative light; as well as with *admitted*, which construes the identity as something to be ashamed of. Thus, what is supposed to be a neutral, descriptive term actually continues to instantiate homophobic discourses.

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<sup>11</sup>The text was taken from the Lords Hansard, available online at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/lords>, before being hand-cleaned.

<sup>12</sup>The BNC contains approximately 100 million words of written and spoken English (although mostly written) collected in the late twentieth century. One potential confound to be borne in mind when using it is that the most recent texts are from 1993, which means the data is now more than two decades old, and therefore not as representative of contemporary language use as it once was.

## 6. Keywords

The corpus containing speeches by those in favour of same-sex marriage was compared with that containing speeches by those opposed, using the free software AntConc (Anthony 2011) to compile a list of *keywords* for each side. Baker (2004: 90), quoting Scott (1999), defines a keyword as “any word which is found to be outstanding in its frequency in the text”. There are two techniques for generating keyword lists: either a sample corpus can be compared to a much larger ‘benchmark’ corpus, such as the BNC, or two similarly-sized corpora can be compared with one another. Following Baker, it is the latter technique that was employed here.<sup>13</sup> The two corpora were compared using AntConc’s Keyword List function to ascertain which words appeared significantly more often in one text over the other.

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  $p < 0.0005$ ).<sup>14,15</sup> A *keyness* score represents how strong this tendency is.

Baker (2004: 90) calls keywords “lexical signposts”, which is an apt description. They help to signal what the producers of a text have focussed on, what the themes and topics are which they have chosen to develop, and ultimately, so the claim goes, the discourses which they employ. But keywords are the beginning rather than the sum total of analysis: having discovered which words are key, it is down to the analyst to conduct further investigation, looking at concordances of how these words appear in context, which words they collocate with, and how they appear in phrases and larger constructions, both in the corpora under consideration and in wider, reference corpora. In so doing, the discourse analyst can come to discover the various discourses which are used and constructed in and through the texts. Discourse analysis being what Potter (1997) has called a “craft skill”, one which, more than some other disciplines, is reliant on the scholar’s “analytic mentality” (Bloor & Wood 2006: 57), this latter move is obviously less empirically based—or perhaps it is better to say more subjective, less easily replicable (dare one say, therefore, less scientific? How do we resolve a situation where scholars disagree on which discourses can be identified in a text, for example?). It is here that I think a corpus-based, keywords approach can be of use, going some way towards mitigating these potential criticisms. Firstly, a list of keywords gives the analyst a starting point, an ‘in’, so to speak, offering data which are more focussed and less unwieldy than trying to deal with an entire text heuristically. Secondly, it might be said to give a more objective grounding for the analysis. This claim, though, is problematic; it may be better to think of keywords as offering a further (and more easily replicable/scrutable) level of subjectivity, one which guides the analyst’s focus, but which is still subject to their

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<sup>13</sup>For discussion, see Baker (2004: 90, note 4).

<sup>14</sup>The ‘keyness’ (log-likelihood) score corresponding to  $p < 0.0005$  is 12.1157, and so I manually selected only the keywords which scored higher than this.

<sup>15</sup>See Baker (2004: 90, note 5) for discussion of why the  $p$  value is set so low. Essentially, a very selective list of keywords is more useful to the analyst than a larger one which may, nonetheless, still represent statistically significant differences between the two texts. For example, using  $p < 0.05$ , the standard threshold in the social sciences, for the data at hand would have generated a daunting 541 keywords.

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.

individual judgement.<sup>16</sup>

In comparing the two sides in the debate, forty-six keywords were identified: twenty-one of these were more frequently used by those supporting the Bill, and twenty-five of them by those opposing it. These are presented in Tables 1 and 2, in descending order of keyness. In what follows, I will examine some of the various discourses accessed and constructed by the two sides, connecting them to these keywords and showing how they build upon them.

With a pair of relatively small corpora such as those examined here, the importance of the human analyst's scrutiny is particularly clear. The larger a corpus, the less likely it is that any apparently significant finding is simply down to chance. I am confident that the two corpora used in this study are large enough to draw sensible conclusions from, but due to the nature of the data, they are still smaller than one might like, and this throws up artefacts which only become apparent on further exploration. For example, a number of function words appear as keywords, such as *to*, *been*, *has*, and even *a*. Examining the use of these words does not reveal any specific discursive practice, and I do not believe that the opponents of same-sex marriage were more likely by virtue of their position to use the indefinite article, for example. Rather, I believe that accidental and quite normal random differences in the relative frequencies of these very common words have been exaggerated by the comparatively small size of the two corpora (and the difference in size between them).

<sup>16</sup>I thank Brian W. King (pers. comm.) for valuable insight on this point.

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.

Similarly, the word *war* appears as a keyword in the opponents' speeches, which at first glance is tantalising. However, it is a red herring: eight out of the thirteen uses occur in a single, short stretch of speech by Lord James of Blackheath on 3 June, where he is discussing a pair of villages in England which do not have war memorials. Since discourses which are employed by more than one speaker are of more interest than idiosyncratic lines of argumentation, I will pay less attention to keywords which are distributed across a single speech like this.

Both of these examples show that it is only through examining language in use, and by considering the keywords in context, that we can reach meaningful conclusions. The corpus-based techniques help guide the analyst, but they are no substitute for his or her own careful analysis of a text.

## 7. Discourses of homosexuality

### 7.1 Homosexual acts, but gay identities?

Two words which emerged as crucial in Baker's study were the words *gay* and *homosexual*. One of Baker's main findings was that the Lords used the word *homosexual* to describe acts, while the word *gay* was preferred for identities. On top of this, there was a marked preference among the anti-reform speakers for *homosexual* over *gay*, thus constructing homosexuality as something one does rather than as an identity one has. This reflects a rather Victorian idea of sexuality, comparable to Foucault's (1979 [1976]) discussion of the sodomite as actor vs. the homosexual as 'species'. For many Lords in the period 1998–2000, it seems, homosexuals remained little more than sodomites.

However, much has changed since 2000. In 2002, same-sex couples were granted equal rights to adopt; in 2003, Section 28 was repealed; the Civil Partnership Act 2004 gave legal status to same-sex relationships; the Gender Recognition Act 2004 gave transsexual people the right to be legally recognised as their self-preferred gender; and the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010 prohibited discrimination against lesbians and gay men in the provision of services. What is more, many prominent public officials, celebrities, and even sports stars (such as rugby player Gareth Thomas), came out as LGBT during this time. These events have been matched by changes in attitude: the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that the percentage of respondents who believed that sexual relationships between adults of the same sex are always or mostly wrong fell from 46% in 2000 to 28% in 2012.<sup>17</sup> It might therefore be natural to expect the discourses around homosexuality to have also changed. And indeed, there are significant differences between Baker's findings and the present debate in both the frequency and usage of the words *gay* and *homosexual*. Counts for the two words are given in Table 3; Baker's (2004: 93) Table 3 is reproduced as Table 4.

	Supporters	Opponents
gay(s)	168 (3.14)	44 (0.95)
homosexual(s)	27 (0.50)	40 (0.86)

**Table 3:** Frequencies of *gay(s)* and *homosexual(s)* in the House of Lords debates. Numbers in brackets are frequencies per 1000 words.

	Pro-reform	Anti-reform
gay(s)	58 (1.1)	61 (1.0)
homosexual(s)	166 (3.2)	214 (3.7)

**Table 4:** Frequencies of *gay(s)* and *homosexual(s)* in the House of Lords debates reported in Baker (2004). Numbers in brackets are frequencies per 1000 words.

Firstly, we note that *homosexual(s)* is simply much less frequent in the present corpus. This might well be because of the tendency Baker identified for *homosexual* to refer to acts—since the debate this time is not about gay sex but about gay

<sup>17</sup><http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-30/personal-relationships/homosexuality.aspx>.

marriage, it is hardly surprising that references to acts are reduced, and so, concomitantly, are references to *homosexual*. With that said, we still observe that those opposed to what we might broadly call pro-LGBT reform continue to use the term *homosexual* more frequently than those in favour. And the opposite is true of *gay* in both studies. Since the preferred label in the LGBT community is *gay* rather than *homosexual* (many object to the latter's pathologising implications), it is perhaps not surprising that this lexical choice serves as a signal of allegiance. Indeed, it is noteworthy that this and other self-preferred labels used by LGBT individuals (*lesbian* and *trans*) appear as keywords in the supporters' speeches.

Looking at how *gay* and *homosexual* are used in context, it no longer seems to be true that the Lords are accessing a discourse which rejects the idea of homosexuality "being an internal part of one's identity" (Baker 2004: 93). In contrast to what Baker discovered, the strongest immediate right-hand collocates for both *gay* and *homosexual* now show an enormous amount of parallelism. For *homosexual*, the most frequent collocates are *marriage* (8), *people* (5), *relationships* (3), *couples* (3), and *community* (3). These all relate to people *qua* people, not merely as (perverted) actors. To enter into a relationship, to be in a couple, or to form a community means to be an individual; and to form a community strongly implies an *identity*. The most frequent immediate right-hand collocates of *gay* are *people* (31), *marriage(s)* (26), *man/men* (24), *and* (22), *couple(s)* (22), and *community* (9). The word *and* may seem a little anomalous, but it is related to the common collocation *gay and lesbian* (15 out of the 22 instances occur in this context). If we put *and* to one side, then, we see a striking similarity between the collocates of these two words, in contrast to the disparity Baker identified. It is, however, among the speeches of the supporters that we find a more pronounced respect for LGBT identity. We notice that *their* is a keyword for the supporters, and one important use of this word is in referring to LGBT people as a group.<sup>18</sup>

[A]llowing same-sex couples to marry will remove yet another distinction between lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and those who are straight. This will reduce stigma and take another step forward on the road towards LGBT people receiving **their** full rights.

Baroness Gould of Potternewton, 3 June 2013

Despite all of this, critical comments about the word *gay* still surface in remarks made by some Lords:

I regret very much that the fine old English and French word "gay" has, in my lifetime, been appropriated by a small but vocal minority of the population. The result is that it can no longer be used in its original and rather delightful meaning.

Lord Hylton, 3 June 2013

However, the accompanying censure of the identity is no longer present. The homo-

<sup>18</sup>When we look at the numbers, nearly 30% of the instances of *their* in the supporters' speeches unambiguously refer to LGBT people (71/245) as opposed to less than 20% in the speeches of the opponents (22/114; and of those 22, 8 appear in a short stretch of speech where Baroness Cumberlege urges LGBT people to "find their own terminology, their own symbols to express their rights and their different contribution to society" (3 June)).

sexual is a species, although for some s/he does not have the right to be called gay.

## 7.2 Supporters of the Bill: A classical liberal discourse of freedom

Supporters of the Bill access what I propose to call a ‘classical liberal’ discourse. This emphasises a particular model of freedom,<sup>19</sup> whereby one should be free to act as one wishes, provided that one does not impinge unduly on others. This is known as the harm principle, and was first outlined by Mill (1859), where he argues that “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” (Mill 1859: 22).

Here, this discourse is 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:

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

We were both firmly of the view that the **protections** provided by the Bill to churches, **religious** organisations and church ministers are strong.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, 3 June 2013

This is another area where the supporters make use of the keyword *their*: although they agree with the content of the Bill, they want to make sure that the rights of others to disagree with them are protected:

Of course there are also other definitions of marriage, notably those of different religious faiths. They have every right to **their** own views about what marriage means for them and **their** adherents. So I welcome the safeguards included in the Bill to ensure that no religious organisation or individual minister can be compelled to participate in a same-sex marriage ceremony.

Lord Aberdare, 4 June 2013

In the BNC, many of the common verbal collocates of the lemma ALLOW are positive, and especially relate to extending membership or granting rights or permis-

<sup>19</sup>Although not a keyword by our criteria, the word *freedom* itself has a relatively high keyness score of 12.0 in the supporters’ speeches.

sions, for example *develop*, *enter*, *choose*, *grow*, and *participate*. The supporters use this semantic prosody to frame same-sex marriage as a positive thing, and as merely extending to a previously excluded minority the same rights enjoyed by the majority. The opponents of the Bill do not refer to the proposals in this way. Instead, they talk of *change*. This is a finding shared by Van der Bom et al. (2015), who show that supporters of same-sex marriage tended to speak in terms of *extending* the law, whereas opponents talked of *changing* it. When we look at how *change* is frequently modified in the BNC, we see that its semantic preference is not entirely neutral. Strong left-hand collocates of the noun *change* are *major*, *significant*, *radical*, *fundamental*, and *dramatic*. Words with the opposite meaning, like *slight* and *subtle*, appear much less frequently, and with far fewer synonyms, although they are still strong collocates. Thus, the underlying semantic preference of *change* is for large, dramatic changes, a fact echoed in the opponents' speeches as well: *fundamental* is a strong collocate of *change* here.

The opponents' use of CHANGE over ALLOW thereby not only rejects the positive associations of ALLOW, but also helps to refute the supporters' claims that the Bill is enacting a minimal change—simply a small amendment to fix an oversight in the law as it stands. Instead, the Bill is positioned as a radical rewriting of the status quo, of the pre-existing notion of marriage, and of “the accepted meaning of language”, as Lord Singh of Wimbledon rather melodramatically puts it (3 June).

Although using CHANGE where the supporters use ALLOW is a hallmark of the opponents' speeches, this does not mean that the supporters do not make use of this lemma at all. In fact, *changed* is a keyword in the supporters' speeches. This corresponds to its use in refuting an argument of the opponents that the meaning of 'marriage' is immutable, by pointing out that it has actually *changed* many times in the past:

The noble Lord, Lord Pannick, eloquently pointed out that its legal meaning has **changed** over the years; and no less significantly, its social meaning has **changed**.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth, 3 June 2013

Returning to the classical liberal discourse, it is interesting to observe that the opponents of the Bill often attempt to contest the supporters' rights to claim that their agenda *is* the liberal agenda, but very rarely that there ought to *be* a liberal agenda. Indeed, their complaints often amount to suggesting that liberal ideals are *not* in fact the real motivation for the Bill, but instead some other cause such as a misguided sense of 'political correctness'. This is because what I have called the classical liberal discourse of the supporters is a form of *hegemonic* discourse in the UK (and in most Western democracies), i.e. one that has achieved cultural dominance (especially through general acceptance rather than forced imposition). The supporters are fully aware of this: we can often see in their use of *our* (a keyword) an attempt to suggest a shared aim, and to reassure the Bill's opponents that its subject matter is about principle, and not special interests:

This Bill addresses things that matter to all of us: **our** personal freedoms, **our** faith in what we believe, and the acceptance of who we are and who we love.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston, 3 June 2013

At the same time, Baroness Stowell also attempts to explicitly make the claim that the supporters' position *is* the majority one:

If we want future generations to support marriage, we need the institution to reflect **our** modern inclusive society.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston, 3 June 2013

The implication here being, of course, that the Bill's proposals would bring the institution of marriage in line with the expectations of society: *our* society, i.e. the one that opponents claim to represent as well.

By evoking this hegemonic discourse, the supporters of the Bill place themselves in the advantageous position of 'speaking from power': hegemonic discourses are seen as normative; they are the standard from which other, countervailing discourses are judged to deviate. For this reason, it would not be strategic for the opponents to attempt to delegitimize the discourse itself; instead, they are forced to dispute the supporters' rights or ability to access such a discourse. Their use of CHANGE over ALLOW is one example of this strategy.

### 7.3 Opponents of the Bill: A discourse of due process

As well as attempting to counter the supporters' liberal pretensions, the opponents also construct their own discourse, one of 'due process'. This is linked to the keywords *consultation*, *process*, *referendum*, and *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

Lord Browne goes on to speak about the lack of a mandate for the Government to push this Bill, how the Government's consultation was biased, flawed, and "shameful", and how the Bill had had inadequate scrutiny thus far. Many other Lords make similar remarks:

It [i.e., the Bill] is not the outcome of a manifesto commitment, of a **referendum**, of a green paper, of a white paper and of normal **consultation**. In the 126 letters in my postbag yesterday, 120 were against this Bill and six were for it. One thing that was articulated repeatedly in those letters [...] was that the **Government** had not gone through the normal processes in approaching this matter.

Baroness O'Loan, 4 June 2013

There seems to be, if not general agreement, certainly some agreement that the Bill is in a mess, ill thought through and without proper **process** or popular mandate. The noble Lord, Lord Dannatt, went so far as to say that the progress of the Bill has to date been tantamount to an abuse of **process**. He might well be right.

Lord Dear, 4 June 2013

This exemplifies the strategy employed by a number of opponents of the Bill; the fact that so much procedural terminology emerges as key in the opponents' speeches serves to demonstrate the disproportionate emphasis placed on this matter by those against marriage reform.

As a strategic choice, this is a noteworthy one: many of the Lords in opposition to the Bill choose not to dispute the actual substance of the Bill, but to focus instead on its form or implementation. This strategy will of course be familiar to anyone who has ever spent any time on a committee: often the best way to derail a proposal is to object to the way it has been introduced, rather than addressing the substance of the issue. In this instance, the strategy has two main effects. Firstly, it may serve as a pre-emptive deflection of accusations of homophobia, a charge of which many Lords are all too well aware:

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

Given the supporters' insistence on framing their position in terms of a *hegemonic* liberal discourse of tolerance and freedom for all, the opponents of the Bill are put in a difficult position: they wish to oppose the pro-marriage reform camp, but they must be at pains to demonstrate that, in doing so, they are not in fact opposing the liberal discourse itself. The insistence on due process offers a way to avoid this problematic position.

The second function of such a discourse here is cross-faction consensus. Sensing that opposition to the spirit of the Bill is in a minority (a fact reinforced by the supporters' stating their position in terms of a hegemonic discourse—those undecided or without strong opinions may be led to side with the supporters, simply because the hegemonic discourse is seen as the default), the opponents seek to disregard the actual matter at hand, and build consensus over the letter of the legislation:

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.

Lord Browne of Belmont, 4 June 2013

Another way in which the discourse of due process is used is to portray the opponents of the Bill as objective. By focussing on procedure and the mechanics of law-making, the opponents seek to position themselves as the rational, thoughtful ones in the debate. This supposed objectivism is further evidenced in one use of the keyword *you*, as a generic pronoun, used in quasi-syllogistic reasoning:

If **you** have two different things and put them together, **you** do not arrive at a larger quantity of the thing that was originally there; **you** arrive at something new. If **you** add one part of hydrogen to two parts of oxygen, **you** finish up with water. Whatever **you** say in the law, there are two different categories here

Lord Elton, 17 June 2013

We see several of these appeals to analogy being used to highlight the purported ab-

surdity of the Bill; they each have in common a desire to ground the debate in something concrete, physical, and supposedly, therefore, objective.

If **you** mix up values and edges are no longer defined, it is like mixing many paints together; the end result is a dull, amorphous and confusing moral mess.

Lord Vinson, 4 June 2013

What is more, this positioning enables the opponents to counter the supporters' affective appeals to *love* (a keyword in the pro-marriage reform speeches). Obviously, no-one wishes to be seen to be opposed to love, but by focussing on procedure and process, the opponents of the Bill can discredit the discourse of love and tolerance as overly sentimental, and therefore as not paying sufficient attention to logic and rational thought:

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?

Lord Anderson of Swansea, 4 June 2013

In appealing to the discourse of due process, the opponents of the Bill seek to portray themselves as detached, unsentimental statesmen, who do not reject liberal ideals *per se*, but who see past the populist conceit of appealing to emotion which is evinced by discussions of *love*.

#### **7.4 'Unintended and unanticipated consequences'**

In the quotation above, Lord Anderson engages in a *reductio ad absurdum* to reinforce his point, suggesting that those in favour of 'marriage as state-sanctioned love' have not thought their definition through, and that the logical conclusions of their line of reasoning are patently absurd (he mentions incest and bigamy, whilst others suggest polygamy will be the next step). This appeal to the idea of unintended and (supposedly) undesirable *consequences* (a keyword) is important for the opponents of the Bill.

My noble friend Lord Dear and others have pointed out the constitutional and procedural defects of this Bill, so I will not repeat them. I do however agree with those who have identified unintended and unanticipated **consequences**.

Lord Hylton, 3 June 2013

These unknown *implications* (another keyword) of the Bill are reason enough, so the logic goes, to reject it and start again from scratch. (This discourse is also related to the keyword *deep*, as in Lord Hylton's "deep fears and anxieties" (17 June), for example.)

The ‘unintended consequences’ discourse serves to reinforce the attempt discussed earlier to disrupt the supporters’ rights to access a hegemonic liberal discourse, in two ways. The supporters’ ‘liberal’ claim is that their proposal is an innocuous, small change carried out to correct an inequality in the law; to refute this, the opposition seek to demonstrate that it is in fact neither small nor innocuous. When the unintended consequences are mentioned specifically, they often address one of these two points.

Firstly, they emphasise the large scale of the technical or legal problems raised in the discourse of due process—for example, Lord Dear claims that “the Government had admitted that the impact on existing legislation would require at least 8,000 amendments”, a reference to the fact that existing legislation mentions the word *marriage* 8,000 times. This serves to counter the claim that the proposed change is small.

In order to see how the opponents seek to undermine the claim that such a change would be innocuous, we need initially look no further than the keyword *consequences* itself. Aside from words with neutral sentiment (such as *economic* or *social*), the most common left-hand collocates of *consequences* in the BNC are *disastrous*, *adverse*, *dire*, and *damaging*, showing that it already has a very strong negative semantic prosody.<sup>20</sup>

However, the Lords also appeal to more specific concerns, and it is the keyword *employment* which provides the signpost here:

Equalities legislation has already seen many Christians in court, and this legislation will see many more. This Bill will also jeopardise **employment** and possibly criminalise those with traditional views of marriage.

Lord Edmiston, 3 June 2013

Baroness Cumberlege has a number of specific examples in mind:

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.

Baroness Cumberlege, 17 June 2013

The Lords are concerned about provisions to protect the freedom of those opposed to same-sex marriage to express their view. Specifically, they are accessing a ‘political correctness gone mad’, or ‘world upside-down’ discourse—where the ‘silent majority’ are persecuted for their seemingly unfashionable beliefs—and expressing concern that good, honest people who simply happen to disagree with same-sex marriage may face material injury, through the loss of their job, or demotion, etc. And the claim is that this could happen to anyone: another use of the keyword *you* is to generalise the worry, to suggest that the damage caused by the Bill could affect anyone, not just the few case studies the opponents provide:

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<sup>20</sup>My thanks to Paul Baker (pers. comm.) for pointing this out to me.

**You** have to close your bed and breakfast if you will not accept gay couples, although pubs can refuse to serve customers—I do not understand that. **You** will be sacked from your job if **you** wear a cross—even a teeny-weeny one.

Baroness Knight of Collingtree, 3 June 2013

Since freedom is central to the classical liberal discourse, and especially that one person's freedoms should not impinge on another's, the situations which Baroness Cumberlege or Baroness Knight describe are potentially quite damning for those who claim support for the Bill based on this discourse.

## 7.5 'It changes the nature and meaning of marriage'

One very important discourse for the opponents is what I will call a discourse of 'linguistic rigidity'. This instantiates a particular belief about meaning and language, in keeping with a generally conservative outlook, which believes that the meanings of words are in some sense immutable, and that, ultimately, language ought not to change at all. Thus, any attempt to change the definition of 'marriage' to include same-sex couples will be either illogical or abhorrent. We can see evidence of this discourse in the keywords *meaning* and *redefining*.

However, in this Bill the Government have chosen to proceed not by addressing real, material or legal inequalities but by **redefining** the key concept of marriage and its **meaning**.

The Lord Bishop of Exeter, 3 June 2013

Some Lords, in their commitment to this belief in linguistic rigidity, hark back to a definition of marriage which has long-since ceased to be the norm:

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

We must surely presume that Lord Edmiston does not mean to imply that all modern marriages must literally be considered blood covenants to be legitimate. But he is forced to apparently express such an opinion by the same logic that leads people to object to the use of the word *decimate* to mean anything other than 'kill one in ten'. A literal belief in the immutability of language forces you to profess to abide by etymologically 'pure' meanings of words, in spite of the fact that, as a competent user of the language, you presumably understand, and probably use, the more commonly accepted meanings on a daily basis.

Of course, it is in part this cognitive dissonance which makes such a position logically incoherent; but at the same time it is what makes it very difficult to argue against: if you are prepared to accept contradictions in your thinking, then a

counterargument which relies on demonstrating such contradictions is unlikely to be very convincing.

The debate about same-sex marriage ‘redefining marriage’ in an undesirable or impossible way is a well-rehearsed one (see McConnell-Ginet 2006 for analysis and discussion), and so I will not dwell on it here. I wish only to note that such a position is not entirely independent of more general discourses around homosexuality. Just as a homophobe might appeal to the discourse of due process to deflect accusations of homophobia, so too can they use the discourse of linguistic rigidity, because this kind of linguistic conservatism is intimately linked to other kinds of normative discourse, especially, in this case, heteronormativity. It ignores the fact that non-normative identities and practices are often erased *through* discourse, especially through their *absence* from discourse. In other words, the present state of affairs is not some neutral linguistic artefact, but rather the product of heteronormative ideology, which has normalised and legitimised particular ways of arranging social and sexual relationships in modern society (*viz.*, the nuclear family), in large part by giving names to those arrangements, and denying them to others—the word *marriage* being a case in point. What this means is that maintaining the status quo is just as much of a political act as changing it. But the opponents of same-sex marriage choose to ignore this fact, instead appealing to spurious notions of the “natural and normal” meaning of words (Lord Tebbit, 3 June), and thereby accessing a heteronormative discourse which naturalises the status quo.

## 7.6 ‘The stability and complementarity of different sexes’

Another discourse which draws heavily on heteronormative ideas of ‘naturalness’ is the discourse of ‘gender complementarity’, which of course relies on more widely circulating discourses of (biological) essentialism that describe men and women as naturally different and complementary.

[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 are attempting to present same-sex marriage in terms of equality, some of the opponents emphasise perceived *difference* (a keyword) between the two sexes (and between same-sex marriage and opposite-sex marriage—a line of argumentation that Bachmann 2011 identifies in his data as well). It is for this reason that the word *complementarity* (another keyword) appears eight times in the opponents’ speeches, but does not appear once in those of the supporters. Since men and women go together so naturally, the argument goes, why would we change something that has worked well up until now?

Children are also mentioned frequently in the debate (*child/children* appears 105 times in the opponents’ and 90 times in the supporters’ speeches), often in reference to the fact that same-sex couples cannot procreate naturally, and that therefore their unions are not ‘marriages’.

While the natural procreation of children may be a possibility for a man and a woman, it can never be for a same-sex couple. [...] Therefore the union proposed for a same-sex couple must be different from marriage since it cannot have this purpose.

Lord Mackay of Clashfern, 4 June 2013

But of course, this is another example of the appeal to etymology that means we must go beyond the common contemporary understanding of words in order to seek out an absolute, original meaning. As Lord Berkeley of Knighton points out, “to see marriage as instituted purely for procreation [...] is to take a somewhat narrow and blinkered view of where we now are in our society” (3 June).

One other strain of the appeal to ‘naturalness’ involves the keyword *consummation*:

The defining process of marriage is **consummation**, which is for the entirely practical purpose of bringing children into the world.

Lord Dannatt, 3 June 2013

The opponents of the Bill spend a disproportionate amount of time focussing on the sexual acts of same-sex couples (*consummation* is mentioned 15 times as against twice in the supporters’ speeches, while *adultery* is mentioned 15 times as opposed to 6). Why is this? The on-record complaint is that there is no definition of consummation or adultery for same-sex couples (or rather, that adultery will only ‘count’ if it is with an opposite-sex partner), and so, instead of the supporters realising their stated aim of equality, they have in fact created further inequality:

[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

This, of course, once again questions the supporters’ rights to access a liberal discourse of equality and freedom in order to make their case.

But beyond this, 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. What is more, such appeals to ‘naturalness’ serve to access a discourse (present more explicitly in the age of consent debate analysed by Baker 2004), which sees homosexual sex as abnormal in some way, as unnatural and therefore as undesirable. By presenting marriage, consummation and procreation as natural and normative, we are repeatedly reminded of just how *unnatural* and deviant LGBT people supposedly are. This diminishes the legitimacy of LGBT people as members of society, and so reduces the perceived obligation to allow them access to privileged social institutions such as marriage.

## 8. Discussion

Perhaps no one will be very surprised by the kinds of discourses that the Lords accessed in constructing their arguments. The liberal pretensions of the supporters as well as both the technical and naturalistic arguments of the opponents are well-practised strategies which anyone with an interest in discourses of sex and gender will recognise. However, I believe that in our analysis we can go beyond simply enumerating the discourses. How can we draw them together?

In general, the supporters of reform used much more straightforward discourses than those opposed. Theirs was a discourse of classical liberalism, based also on ideas of tolerance and equality, and it was stated relatively simply. In contrast, the opponents' position is articulated in a series of disparate discourses, which can be organised on a scale depending on how great an emphasis they place on the actual substance of the Bill, and, concomitantly, on homophobic discourses.

The argument based on the discourse of due process claims not to care at all about the substance of the Bill: its objections are procedural. The 'unintended consequences' discourse begins as similarly bureaucratic, but soon slips into the realm of moral outrage: for example, references to polygamy and incest. Here the opponents are accessing discourses linking homosexuality to moral decay and perversion (akin to the 'danger and ruin' discourse identified by Baker 2004). Discourses around redefining 'marriage' and the complementarity of the sexes emphatically *are* interested in the substance of the Bill. We are led to believe that it is unnatural both to change the meaning of words and to pretend that men and women are anything other than 'equal but opposite'. And although the opponents of the Bill are at pains to defend themselves from accusations of homophobia, it is difficult not to see such appeals to unnaturalness or abnormality as accessing well-known homophobic discourses which identify homosexuality with just these characteristics. So too the 'world upside-down' images of clerical and ontological mayhem summoned by discussions of the dire consequences of same-sex marriage (for example, talk of having to change the words *mother* and *father* to *progenitor A* and *progenitor B*)—these parallel the common trope of seeing homosexuality as indicative of moral and social decline.

The arrangement we find here, where the pro-reformers are straightforward in their approach while the anti-reformers have a more nuanced and complex chain of argumentation, along with a strategy for avoiding accusations of homophobia, recurs in the other studies mentioned above in Section 3. Insofar as my findings corroborate theirs, we might begin to ask whether there is indeed a pattern here, and I wish to speculate briefly on what the reasons for this might be. Since the liberal discourse (taken in its broadest sense to include the discourses of equality and tolerance that Baker and others have identified) is hegemonic, the pro-reformers in the debate have an advantage. The rhetorical burden of proof, so to speak, lies on the shoulders of those who seek to offer either countervailing discourses or to dislodge the authority of those who would claim to speak from the hegemonic position. This problem is compounded by the fact that there is no obvious single candidate for a popular countervailing discourse which the opponents could present as a simple monolithic opposition to the liberal stance. Obviously, conservatism plays a large role in opposing the legislation discussed in both my paper and Baker's, but even those speaking from a conservative standpoint seek to position themselves as allied to liberty, in the classical sense; in other words, the conservative position does not offer

a genuine alternative to liberal hegemony (and, in the present case, the Bill itself was introduced by a Conservative Party-led coalition, further clouding the issue).

What is more, despite sometimes accessing quite flagrantly homophobic discourses, the opponents of pro-LGBT reform still feel the need to position themselves as not being homophobic. This is once again in deference to a largely liberal set of values and discourses which valorise equality and tolerance. The anti-LGBT stance cannot be articulated coherently within the liberal discourses which pervade modern Parliamentary debate, and so the opponents of reform are forced to make use of more and more subtle approaches. This obligation, along with the lack of a single, strong countervailing discourse, might go some way to explaining the fractured nature of the anti-reform position and the discourses which they present.

## 9. Conclusion

For those of us who are opposed to homophobia in all its forms, this may well seem like a positive finding: it seems that homophobic attitudes are more difficult to articulate in political debate in the UK. And this is indeed a good thing, albeit with two very important caveats.

Firstly, we must not forget that this is obviously a product of a particular context in a particular culture; what counts as hegemonic depends on the prevailing discursive structures of a society. While what I have shown may be true in public, political discourse in the UK, we must not be fooled therefore into thinking that it is true everywhere or in all contexts: recent developments in Uganda, for example, where quite violent anti-homosexual legislation was passed (although it has now thankfully been overturned), show us that in societies where the prevalent discourses are ones of tradition, family values, and religious conservatism, quite different circumstances obtain. Not that this is restricted to Africa: one only has to look to the religious right in the USA to see the same trio of dangerous discourses promoting a similarly violent atmosphere. One potentially fruitful area for future research would be to examine political discourse in these and other countries, where, by hypothesis, we might expect explicit homophobic discourse to remain more prominent. There has been work on attitudes towards same-sex marriage in the USA, in the media and elsewhere, such as that by Moscovitz (2010) and Baunach (2011), but I am not aware of any corpus-based discourse analysis studies looking at the political domain, either here or in Uganda.

Secondly, we must not mistake being cornered for being defeated. As we have seen, the limited discursive space afforded to the opponents of pro-LGBT legislation forces them into a more nuanced line of argumentation. I have implied that this is a demonstration of their being on the back foot, but we must also be aware that necessity is the mother of invention, and that being forced to develop more complex lines of argumentation does not necessarily mean being exposed as wrong. From the outside of a debate, it is often the side with the most arguments which seems to be the one with the more solid position, even if all of their arguments ultimately come to naught.

Alongside the foregoing analysis, I hope to have further demonstrated the usefulness of corpus-based approaches to discourse analysis and the sociolinguistic enterprise generally. Raw numbers and data cannot give us all the answers, but they can act as invaluable “signposts” to help guide the analyst. Of course, as mine and Baker’s contributions have exemplified, the human analyst has a vital role to play in examining usage in context. But if this is informed at every step by verifiable and replicable

data, it allows the researcher to speak with more authority and to have more confidence in his or her analyses.

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