

Civil partnership – “gay marriage in all but name”: a corpus-driven analysis of discourses of same-sex relationships in the UK Parliament

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Abstract

This paper deals with the language used in the debates in both Houses of Parliament in the United Kingdom that allowed civil partnerships to take place. My aim is to uncover discourses of same-sex relationships which are accessed in British Parliament. For this purpose, a corpus of these debates was compiled and its keywords were taken as a starting point for further analysis. As different keyword lists can be calculated by comparing different data sets, I argue that the best approach in this study is to take the corpus as a whole and to compare it to a reference corpus. I then grouped the keywords thematically and analysed them in context, scrutinising collocations and concordance lines in order to see how (recurrent) uses of language construct gay and lesbian relationships. Different, rather contradicting, discourses are drawn on by different parties in the debates. We can see that discourses are often used to frame a line of argumentation.

1. Introduction

On one of the final days of 2005, just after Christmas, a German yellow press magazine reported that the pop star, Elton John, had married his partner, David Furnish, in Windsor. This was perhaps surprising, given that the UK does not allow same-sex marriage; however, recent legislation had allowed civil partnerships between same-sex couples. The magazine’s rebranding of civil partnerships as ‘marriage’ is discursively interesting, and served to inspire this paper, which deals with the language used in the debates in both Houses of Parliament in the United Kingdom that led to the implementation of civil partnerships. The question I aim to answer is, ‘Which discourses

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of same-sex relationships are drawn on in the parliamentary debates?’ This provides valuable insights into how gay and lesbian relationships are regarded in society in general. It has been demonstrated (e.g., Baker, 2005, 2006) that corpus-linguistic techniques are a very promising means of analysing discourses. In this paper, I take keywords calculated by WordSmith Tools as central for uncovering discourses.

This paper begins with a short presentation of the socio-cultural background, situating the Civil Partnership Bill within the context of the gay and lesbian rights movement and changes in the concept of marriage. Following that, I will define the concept of discourse that I use, give a short overview of the ways corpus linguistics, in particular keywords, and (critical) discourse analysis have been combined, and then describe my corpora and the method I employed to analyse them. Finally, the discourses of same-sex relationships as found in the parliamentary debates will be discussed.

2. Civil Partnership in the UK

The Civil Partnership Act became law in the UK on 5 December 2005. From that day, same-sex couples have been able to register their partnership. Under this law, the rights and responsibilities of so-called civil partners are similar to the ones enjoyed by heterosexual couples. To name just a few, there is an exemption on inheritance tax, joint treatment for income-related benefits, the right to take responsibility for their partner’s children, the right to register the death of a partner, *etc.*²

Differences between civil partnership and civil marriage, therefore, tend to be terminological or technical, or, as argued by gay and lesbian activists and feminist critics, symbolic. Civil partnerships are thus regarded as akin to ‘sexual apartheid’ (Tatchell, 2009), since they still deprive gay men and lesbians of the ‘highest social status and approval’ (Auchmuty, 2004: 102) due to ‘exclusion from marriage’ (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 2004: 133). At the level of terminology, same-sex couples cannot *marry* and become *husband* and *husband* or *wife* and *wife*, but they enter a *civil partnership* and become *civil partners* – at least officially. On a technical level, the registration of the partnership involves some minor differences: a civil partnership is formed by signing the respective documents, yet no exchange of vows is necessary, and the ceremony can only be conducted by a registrar and does not allow for any religious activity. It is telling that the concepts of consummation and adultery are not transferred from civil marriage to civil partnership. The Government explains that these concepts have ‘a specific meaning within the context of heterosexual relations’ (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003) and simply cannot be applied to same-sex relationships. Stychin (2006: 83) argues that ‘this provides the most significant way in

² See the Government Equalities Office, at: <http://www.equalities.gov.uk>

which lesbian and gay relationships remain unassimilated to an unchallenged norm of heterosexual marriage’.

In the UK, the Civil Partnership Act is regarded as a milestone in the rights of gay and lesbian couples. By the end of 2008, 33,956 civil partnerships were registered in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Although the Act seems to have been accepted by British society quite readily, it was not passed in Parliament without great controversy. A central point of contention was not whether gay men and lesbians should be granted these rights and responsibilities, but whether the Act should be extended to other forms of relationships, such as carers, home-sharers or cohabiting unmarried heterosexual couples. So it was mainly a debate about who should be included in the new law, at least superficially.

The debate on the legal recognition of same-sex couples is embedded in some greater social changes of the last century: the fight for equality for gay men and lesbians, and changes in the concept of marriage. In the UK, under the Labour government, a number of recent laws have moved towards the equalisation of gay and heterosexual people: the removal of the ban on gay men and lesbians in the armed forces, the equalisation of the age of sexual consent to sixteen, and the introduction of laws to prevent discrimination based on sexuality. Furthermore, British Social Attitudes Surveys show that the percentage of people viewing homosexuality as always or mostly wrong has steadily fallen since the late 1980s (from 74 percent in 1988 to 36 percent in 2008).³

The concept of marriage has been changing and its value seems to be declining if one takes marriage rates as a possible indicator. The marriage rate, (i.e., the number of men or women marrying per 1,000 unmarried men or women aged sixteen or over, as well as the overall number of marriages registered in England and Wales), has decreased steadily over the recent decades, even though a slight increase can be observed between 2002 and 2004.⁴ Yet marriage is still regarded as an institution and the ultimate goal of many heterosexual couples. The legal recognition of same-sex couples as civil partnerships is considered to be possible because of the transformation of marriage on a larger scale to the ‘companionate model’ (Garrett, 2007: 133):

The same-sex marriage movement that began in the late twentieth century [...] could thus be viewed as a natural development, as part of the transformation in Western conceptions of love and marriage—namely, the shift in the concept of marriage from a patriarchal property arrangement for the purpose of procreation, with specific gender roles for each partner, to a relationship based on equality, affection, and the love of two people for each other.

(Merin, 2002: 30)

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8479624.stm> (accessed September 2010)

⁴ See: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/marr0210.pdf> (accessed September 2010)

Changes in the institution of marriage do not have a direct influence on the legal status of same-sex couples, but are regarded as prerequisite for even considering extending marriage to or introducing a similar concept such as civil partnership for gay men and lesbians. Within a strict system of gender roles it is difficult to imagine how the recognition of same-sex couples would fit into that model.

3. Theoretical concept: discourse(s)

This paper is about detecting discourses of same-sex relationships as reproduced in the debates on civil partnership in Parliament. The notion of discourse I adhere to in this paper originates in critical social theory/post-structuralism. The following two statements introduce this concept. Cameron (2001: 15) states that:

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 repertoire represents the (possible) discourses of a particular subject. Discourse is further defined by Burr (1995: 48) as:

a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events... Surrounding any one object, event, person etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the world, a different way of representing the world.

Taking this perspective one can argue that reality is discursively structured. By using language we shape our understanding of the world and do not simply reflect the world around us. As Barker (2003: 102) notes: '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.' This critical notion of discourse takes us back to Foucault (1972: 49) who defines discourses as 'practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak', which clearly posits a 'potentially constitutive' (Sunderland, 2004: 8) character of discourses. Applied here, it shows that politics has created the object of civil partnership by means of the Act and the debates in the Houses of Parliament. New subjects are produced as a result: civil partners. These people have existed before and they have had loving relationships as partners before, but the discourses have constructed a new identity category into which they can be put. Along with this category come certain rights, responsibilities, a new

status, *etc.* While discourses have an effect on people's lives, this constitutive idea of discourses, (i.e., the legal construction of a new category of people), is rather rare – although this does not decrease the relevance of discourse in terms of social and political significance.

It is important to realise, here, that there is not just one discourse of a particular subject, but many 'discourses' (Cameron, 2001: 15). These discourses of one and the same subject are related in certain ways; for instance, they might support or oppose each other. Such contesting or contradictory discourses are often an indicator of possible forthcoming social change (Pecheux, 1982). Sunderland (2004: 3) points to '[t]he crucial task' for the researcher, which is:

how to identify and then label discourses as there is no finite set of discourses; discourses are not bounded and not even visible; they are historical and transient; they are continually produced and reproduced. Individuals and different social groups will see the same discursive 'cues' or 'traces' [...] and will recognize (or better, 'co-construct') different discourses. Discourse identification is thus always *interpretive*.
(Sunderland, 2004: 3; emphasis as per original)

Thus, my perspective as a gay man, my personal experience and my exposure to discourses, plays a significant role in how I see, interpret and label discourses. This does not mean that the discourses of same-sex relationships I see in the debates are just discernible by me, but they should also be recognisable to other language users. What serves as the basis to identify discourses are linguistic 'traces'. These traces point to a certain discourse and can be used to (re)construct that discourse, provided that the linguistic features form a systematic and coherent set of ideas (see Mills, 1997: 17).

The focus in this paper is on the discourse of same-sex relationships. So far, studies of discourses of homosexuality centre on questions of construction of identity and community (e.g., Baker, 2005; and Koller, 2008); relationships are only taken into account if they are relevant. As there is a change in gay and lesbian politics from identity issues to relationship acceptance and recognition (see Weeks, 2000: 213) it seems reasonable to focus on discourses of same-sex relationships. The debates in British Parliament about the introduction of civil partnership provided a very suitable background for such an analysis.

4. Corpora, discourse and keywords

Corpora and corpus linguistic methods have been increasingly used to study discourse(s); the advantages and limitations of this approach have been discussed by Hardt-Mautner (1995), Garzone and Santulli (2004), Baker

(2006, 2010) and Mautner (2009a, 2009b). Some merits that they identify include:

- Reduction of researcher bias in choosing the text(s) and in the interpretation of these;
- The focus on repeated patterns of language use which helps to capture the incremental effect of discourse; and,
- The fact that a wider range of discourses surrounding a topic can be detected.

Recently, studies using corpora (e.g., Baker and McEnery, 2005; Caldas-Coulthard and Moon, 2010; Krishnamurty, 1996; Mautner, 2007; Orpin, 2005; and Piper, 2000) have increased in number, become more refined in issues of methodology (e.g., Baker *et al.*, 2008) and more open to new fields of application, such as historic texts (e.g., Prentice and Hardie, 2009).

This development is even more pronounced for corpus-based studies using keywords. To identify discourses, keywords, which are calculated by programmes such as WordSmith Tools, serve as a starting point for analysis. ‘Key words are those whose frequency is unusually high in comparison with some norm’ (Scott, 2010). Two strategies can be used to conduct a keyword analysis: either two corpora of about the same size are compared, which gives two lists of words which are key in each corpus taking the other as the norm, or a smaller corpus is compared to a larger reference corpus, providing a list of keywords in the smaller corpus, as well as giving a shorter list of words which are negatively key in the smaller corpus – in other words, these words occur ‘less often than would be expected by chance in comparison with the reference corpus’ (Scott, 2010). Keyword lists usually consist of three types of words (Scott, 2010): proper nouns, words indicating the style of the text, and words that signal what the text is about. The first two types of words might not play such an important role in the investigation of discourse. But the ‘aboutness’ words are essential as they give an idea of frequent topics in a corpus. Such keywords may provide a means of accessing the data, although by themselves they do not reveal much. It is usage in context, revealed by concordances, collocates, *etc.*, as well as relations to other keywords and their categorisation ‘according to their rhetorical, pragmatic, semantic or grammatical functions’ (Baker, 2010: 135), which gives the researcher ideas at the outset.

Having the two options for calculation mentioned above, studies using keywords have either calculated the difference between two (or more) kinds of comparable data sets and/or compared the data in question to a general reference corpus, such as the British National Corpus (BNC). An example of the former is Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) who compared the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in British tabloids and broadsheets, and used a categorisation of keywords in CDA-established *topoi*/topics such as ‘number’ or ‘plight’ as a starting point for analysis.

Duguid (2010), Marchi (2010) and Taylor (2010) analysed UK broadsheets diachronically, examining changes in evaluative language and conversational style, the construction of morality, and the changing role of *science*, respectively. Fairclough (2000) compared a corpus of New Labour speeches and documents to an earlier Labour corpus to use the emerging keywords such as *partnership* and *business* to detect changes in the ideology of the Labour party under Blair.

By contrast, other studies have used general reference corpora as a comparator. Johnson *et al.* (2003) compiled two corpora of UK broadsheets from 1994 and 1999, and included articles containing the term *political correctness*. They then compared both corpora to the written component of the BNC and examined the resulting keyword lists to discover shifts in the use of that term. Gerbig (2003) compiled two corpora of pre-General Election German and British newspaper coverage, then compared both to general reference corpora and categorised the keywords – to be more precise the key keywords (a notion that I explain in the next paragraph) – into semantic fields which included politicians, campaign topics and campaigning issues. In a study of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, compiling a corpus of the transcripts of the court proceedings as well as a corpus on their reporting in newspapers, Bondi (2007) investigated how keywords (derived through comparison to the BNC) can be used as a means of researching evaluative meaning, (namely, the speaker's/writer's point of view), and, in particular, as a means of concentrating on how actors and processes are evaluated.

New methodological steps taken in the keyword approach are the extension to key semantic fields/concepts and the calculation of concordance keywords and of key keywords. L'Hôte (2010) used the Wmatrix⁵ software to assign semantic tags to the words in her corpus and calculated the key semantic concepts of the globalisation discourse of New Labour. Taylor (2010) and Marchi (2010) introduced 'concordance keywords': in two corpora all concordance lines of a particular node (such as *scien**) of a previously defined span (such as 600 characters) are compiled to form so-called concordance corpora, which can then be compared to detect concordance keywords.

'A "key key-word" is one which is "key" in more than one of a number of related texts' (Scott, 2010) when all these texts are compared individually to the reference corpus. Among the very few studies having used that approach are Gerbig (2003), already introduced above, who took into account in how many different newspaper articles words are key, and McEnery (2009), who researched publications by a prominent British 'clean-up television' campaigner, Mary Whitehouse. He used key keywords to find out which words were key in all her books (or a significant number of chapters from those books), and was thus able to distinguish 'transient' from 'permanent' keywords (McEnery, 2009: 99). I regard this distinction

⁵ See: <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/usas/>

	Date	Number of tokens
Second Reading	22/04/2004	24,834
Grand Committee, first day	10/05/2004	29,735
Grand Committee, second day	12/05/2004	30,323
Grand Committee, third day	13/05/2004	21,159
Grand Committee, fourth day	17/05/2004	9,772
Grand Committee, fifth day	25/05/2004	22,374
Report Stage	24/06/2004	18,022
Third Reading	01/07/2004	18,224
Consideration of Commons amendments	17/11/2004	16,708
	Total	191,151

Table 1: Debates in the House of Lords

	Date	Number of tokens
Second Reading	12/10/2004	42,234
Standing Committee, first sitting	19/10/2004	17,625
Standing Committee, second sitting	21/10/2004	14,165
Standing Committee, third sitting	21/10/2004	19,661
Standing Committee, fourth sitting	26/10/2004	10,278
Standing Committee, fifth sitting	26/10/2004	16,533
Report Stage and Third Reading	09/11/2004	8,253
	Total	128,749

Table 2: Debates in the House of Commons

as significant and will adopt the key keyword approach in my analysis. The materials and methods employed in my study will be explained in the following section.

5. Data and method

The corpus used in this research contains sixteen electronic transcripts of debates in both Houses of Parliament: nine debates in the House of Lords and seven in the House of Commons. These debates were held between 22 April 2004 and 17 November 2004; all deal with the Civil Partnership Bill and are available online.⁶ In total, the Parliament corpus consists of 319,900 tokens. A more detailed breakdown of the debates in the House of Lords and House of Commons can be seen under Tables 1 and 2.

In order to carry out an analysis, it was necessary to edit the electronic transcripts of the debates. Parts of the transcript which did not directly refer to speech (e.g., ‘Lord Higgins moved Amendment No. 69’) were manually excluded prior to analysis.

⁶ See Hansard, at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

	$p > 0.000001$	$p > 0.0001$	$p > 0.001$
Pro	<i>and</i>	+ <i>sex, important</i>	+ <i>couples, years</i>
Anti	<i>marriage, homosexual, Ireland, Northern, outside</i>	+ <i>discriminates</i>	+ <i>but, unique, laws, breakdown, announced, uniqueness, do, must</i>

Table 3: Keywords in pro- and anti-reform speeches in the House of Commons

I am now going to discuss several approaches to obtaining keyword lists out of the Parliament corpus, pointing out their advantages and disadvantages in uncovering discourses of same-sex relationships. I first intended to divide the contributions to the debates in both Houses of Parliament into those that are in favour of civil partnership and those that are against it. Baker (2005, 2006) has shown that a comparison of the keywords of the pro- and anti-side of a debate in Parliament might yield illuminating results. This has proved to be impracticable in my case, however. First, very few members of the Houses actually opposed the Bill and even fewer of them contributed to the debate. Even more importantly, only the second and the third reading in the House of Commons ended with voting on the Bill, which makes it easy to annotate the data according to speaker attitude. To take a close reading of the contributions as the basis for assigning them to the pro- or anti-side was a hopeless endeavour because there were not just two sides in the debates in the two Houses. As a matter of fact, there are various standpoints that could be summarised as follows:

- civil partnership only for same-sex homosexual couples
- civil partnership for homosexual couples and also for heterosexual unmarried co-habiting couples
- civil partnership for caring family members living in the same house
- civil partnership for all carers in general
- no civil partnership at all

Nevertheless, I conducted a keyword analysis comparing the pro- (39,219 tokens) and the anti-side (11,263 tokens) in the second and third reading in the House of Commons. The keyword list provides those lexical items that are most salient on one side of the debate compared to the other (see Table 3).

It should be noted that the p value needed to be increased significantly in order to obtain more than two or three keywords. These keywords are definitely not sufficient to start a proper discourse analysis, though they might hint at preferred lines of argumentation. The number of keywords is, however, very small and they are only limited to the House of Commons.

House of Commons	<i>people, infidelity, holy, that, matrimony, and, process, his, equality, should, institution, sexually, Scots, marriage, religious, transmitted, Scottish, church, members, constituents, party, immigration, my</i>
House of Lords	<i>general, draft, hardship, helpful, relation, very, security, family, scheme, child, tax, this, these</i>

Table 4: Keywords House of Commons *versus* House of Lords

As a next approach, I worked on the assumption that there might be significant differences in the ways discourses of same-sex relationships are produced in both Houses of Parliament when the Houses are compared with each other. The House of Lords, which contains some hereditary peers, is commonly regarded as more conservative than the fully elected House of Commons. Table 4 shows the list of keywords of both Houses of Parliament when compared to each other with $p < 0.000001$. Keywords that consisted of proper names, terms of address and parliamentary procedure (e.g., *move*) are not included in the table.

Again, this approach did not prove to be very fruitful, although some keywords seem to be rather promising for a critical analysis (and surprising), such as *infidelity*, *sexually transmitted* or *hardship*. A problem, however, is that some of these keywords are only used in one or two debates, particularly in rather topic-specific Committee sittings, so they cannot be regarded as representative. Besides, a word like *members* is used with different meanings and sometimes as part of compound nouns. *Family members*, for instance, is much more frequent in the House of Lords than in the House of Commons, yet *members* is key in the House of Commons. Above all, these keywords only highlight the differences but they do not show words which are used frequently in both Houses. A more inclusive approach to analysing discourses is needed.

Instead, I decided to look at the corpus as a whole. At the same time, whenever necessary in the analysis, I tried to find out which position the speaker takes in the debate as this might be decisive for her/his phrasing. I opted for the BNC Baby as reference corpus (4,060,678 tokens). BNC Baby is a subset of the British National Corpus, consisting of about 1 million words of fiction, newspaper, academic writing and conversation, and so constitutes a fairly representative language mix of British English in the 1990s. The keywords provide those lexical items most salient in my Parliament corpus compared to the reference corpus.

However, even when using the highest significance threshold WordSmith Tools offers ($p < 0.0000000000000001$), 279 keywords are listed. This is a major drawback as there are far too many to analyse—indeed,

some occur several thousand times. A reference corpus of parliamentary language use would possibly have returned fewer keywords since it would have eliminated those words specific to all parliamentary discourse such as *proceedings* and *amended*. Faced with this, I chose to focus on the first one-hundred strongest keywords. This threshold was based on finding a compromise between having enough words to analyse, but also taking into account researcher time and journal word limits. I tried to group them into thematically and/or semantically related fields according to their most prototypical use in the debates, and this provided me with an idea of the relevant issues contained in the debates. Thematic groups of keywords were identified and are listed under Table 5, (note that those terms in boldface are examined in more detail, below).

As I want to rule out that a word might be key simply because it has a high frequency in two or three debates or Committee sittings in which rather specific issues were discussed, I decided to complement this approach with a key keyword analysis. The threshold I set is that a word has to be key in at least half of the debates, (i.e., eight). These 'permanent' keywords (McEnery, 2009: 99) provide a list of concepts that are representative of the debates as a whole. The key keywords are those printed in boldface under Table 5. I subjected these words to a closer analysis. However, where relevant, the other keywords established by comparing the pro-side with the anti-side of the debate and by comparing both Houses of Parliament with each other (Tables 3 and 4) will also be taken into account. I regard it as essential not to neglect other data that at first glance might seem not-so-important or even uninteresting. Just relying on one preferable method might skew the results, which should be checked, corroborated or brought into perspective by complementing the chosen method with other methods. In the end, all results constitute pieces of the 'discourse' puzzle.

Having established the point of entry into the data, I will briefly explain the method of investigating the keywords. Usually, I first concentrate on its (lexical) collocates, using raw frequencies. Since the overall occurrences of the keywords are relatively high, I defined a collocate as a word which co-occurs with another word at least five times in a given span ($-5/+5$, if not otherwise specified). However, less frequent co-occurrences were also considered if they could be shown to contribute to a semantic set. Concordances of the keywords are also taken into account in order to see how keywords are used in context and to see if repeated patterns of use can be uncovered; indeed, '[r]epeated patterns show that evaluative meanings are not merely personal and idiosyncratic, but widely shared in a discourse community. A word, phrase or construction may trigger a cultural stereotype' (Stubbs, 2001: 215).

The importance of keywords in discourse analysis has been summarised by Baker (2004: 347) as follows:

Keywords will [...] not reveal discourses but will direct the researcher to important concepts in a text (in relation to other texts) that may help

Thematic group		Keywords
Relating to the procedure and language in Parliament and the participants in the debates		<i>bill, noble, amendment, hon, lord, amendments, baroness, clause, government, friend, lords, member, minister, committee, debate, gentleman, members, hope, O’Cathain, issue, issues, Lester, support, tabled, schedule, beg, withdraw, lady, nos, point, clear, clauses, respect, Alli, consultation, house, prelate</i>
Relating to the legal implications of the Bill	financial matters	<i>tax, inheritance, pension, pensions, benefits</i>
	moral issues	<i>equality, discrimination</i>
	rights and responsibilities	<i>rights, responsibilities</i>
	other legal implications	<i>Ireland, Northern, legislation, provisions, legal, law, provision, recognition, Scotland</i>
Referring to people involved in the bill and their identities		<i>sex, same, gay, people, married, homosexual, heterosexual, family, carers, lesbian</i>
Referring to relationships and their labelling		<i>civil, partnership, marriage, couples, partnerships, partners, relationship, relationships, partner, commitment</i>
Relating to the act of registration and dissolution		<i>registration, dissolution, enter, marry, registrar</i>
Referring to religion		<i>religious</i>
Function words		<i>that, is, am, not, will, I, to, would, the, my, those, we, be, should, who, whether, are, cannot</i>

Table 5: The first 100 keywords categorised into thematic groups

to highlight the existence of types of (embedded) discourse or ideology. Examining how such keywords occur in context and which grammatical categories they appear in, and looking at their common patterns of co-occurrence should therefore be revealing.

I assume that discourses can be uncovered by considering how keywords are used in lines of argumentation. Arguments brought forward by participants in the debates are, presumably, more effective and convincing the more they reproduce common discourses which can be recognised by everyone (or, in

this case, at least by most speakers in both Houses). Sunderland (2004: 28–9) also stresses the importance of the recognisability of discourses. So a focus is also on how discourses are used to frame an argument.

6. Discourses of same-sex relationships

6.1 ‘Difference’

A discourse frequently drawn on in the debates is one that presents same-sex relationships as (fundamentally) different to opposite-sex relationships. I would argue that the only difference that is not socially constructed lies in the sex of the partners. This difference is already apparent in the fact that same-sex relationships are excluded from marriage and that a different concept has been introduced, namely, civil partnership. A further indicator is the non-applicability of adultery and consummation to same-sex couples in a civil partnership.

A keyword associated with this discourse is *marriage* (1,087 instances), particularly so in the noun phrase RELATIONSHIP⁷/PARTNERSHIP/*couples outside marriage* (26). Same-sex relationships are thus marked for not according with the norm for relationships, (i.e., ‘inside’ marriage). Furthermore, as the wider context reveals, these noun phrases are used to criticise the current Bill for privileging one form of relationship (namely, same-sex relationships) outside marriage over others, (e.g., opposite-sex cohabitant relationships and family members caring for one another). A typical example is:

Why are the Government putting one particular type of relationship outside marriage on a pedestal, in preference to all others?

(Mr Chope, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

This indicates that same-sex relationships are not regarded as equivalent to heterosexual married relationships; rather, they are discursively linked to *carers* (131) and *cohabiting* (82) (heterosexual) couples – both are keywords in the debates, though they are not key keywords. An important difference from cohabiting heterosexual couples is best captured by the keyword *marry* (167). *Marry* is most often used to express either the ‘(in)ability to marry’ (104) (e.g., *can(not) marry* 44 and *unable to marry* 10), which differentiates same-sex from opposite-sex partners, or a ‘personal decision or desire’ to do or not to do so (44) (e.g., *choose (not) to marry* 18, and *wish to marry* 12), a decision only opposite-sex couples can make.

⁷ SMALL CAPS represent a lemma. For example, MARRY is the lemma for the word forms *marry*, *marries*, *married* and *marrying*. MARRIAGE is the lemma for the word forms *marriage* and *marriages*.

The grammatical keyword *not* (3,586) is employed repeatedly to articulate what the Bill is not about, although speakers often neglect to put forward what it actually is about. *Marriage* very often occurs in close proximity (−5, +5) to *not* (141), expressing ideas such as that the Bill is not about introducing marriage, that others claim it is not about introducing marriage although civil partnership actually is marriage (in all but name), that it is detrimental to marriage or that it is not the same as marriage. These ideas definitely contribute to a discourse of ‘difference’ because the preference to see civil partnerships as necessarily different from marriage is shared by all of them. The following is a telling example and it provides a link to the nature of same-sex relationships:

I was surprised to hear the noble Baroness mention marriage. It seems to me that, throughout the passage of the Bill so far, the Government have taken pains to say that the proposed civil partnership is not an analogy with marriage. It has nothing in it about permanence nor about exclusivity and so, on both grounds, it seems to me that the Government are right to say that.

(The Lord Bishop of Winchester, House of Lords, 24 June 2004)

A difference in the nature of the same-sex relationship is invoked by the keyword *commitment* (158) and the use of adjectives expressing sincerity (224) which are frequently used to modify RELATIONSHIP (1,032), such as *long-term* (44) and *committed* (44). On the one hand, the fear is expressed that the commitment may not be clear for those entering a civil partnership and must be made more explicit, for example, by introducing words of commitment during the ceremony or by including the term *commitment* in the text of the Bill, which is then supposed to enhance it.

My Lords, I certainly support the principle behind this amendment to draw attention to the importance of commitment. [...] We are looking at a situation where same-sex couples are increasingly going to adopt children [...] I have been extremely concerned about the Bill. Unstable, uncommitted civil partnerships might enable same-sex couples to adopt children and leave them in a position of insecurity. I believe that the word ‘commitment’ should be crafted into the Bill in some way.

(Lord Northbourne, House of Lords, 24 June 2004)

On the other hand, proponents of the Bill persistently note that same-sex couples can also lead committed, long-term and stable relationships, and are thus worthy of this Bill. This need to stress the idea of permanence and commitment in same-sex relationships has to be read as a counter-argument opposing the ‘difference’ discourse. It seems to be attributable to the notion that here exactly lies a difference from heterosexual couples – at least as gay and lesbian relationships are traditionally conceptualised.

	RELATIONSHIP	COUPLE	Total
<i>gay</i>	6	48	54
<i>homosexual</i>	26	58	84

Table 6: Frequency of *gay* and *homosexual* used to modify RELATIONSHIP and COUPLE

	'identity'	'behaviour'
<i>gay</i>	108	0
<i>homosexual</i>	35	12

Table 7: Frequency of *gay* and *homosexual* used to refer to 'identity' and 'behaviour'

Linked to this is *infidelity* (39) – meaning sexual infidelity – which is a keyword in the House of Commons when compared to the House of Lords. It is used almost exclusively in one Committee sitting where an amendment was tabled (by Mr Chope) to include sexual infidelity in the Bill as a ground for dissolving a civil partnership, (thus mirroring adultery, which is by definition only applicable to marriage). However, the committee argued against such an amendment as a civil partnership can be dissolved on grounds of unreasonable behaviour, and sexual infidelity constitutes such grounds. The purpose of this, and other related amendments by Mr Chope, is 'to make it easier for people to get out of same-sex partnership arrangements. The fact that people can do so easily in France is a good thing' (Mr Chope, House of Commons, 26 October 2004). That an assumed lower level of commitment plays a central role here is apparent in the following statement, also by Mr Chope:

In trying to amend the Bill and to put forward arguments, the challenge has been that I have encountered resistance from the Government and from the majority on the Committee to any idea that we can make the Bill deal with civil partnerships outside marriage at a lower level of commitment.

(Mr Chope, House of Commons, 26 October 2004)

The use of adjectives expressing sexual identity to pre-modify RELATIONSHIP and COUPLE might also hint at same-sex relationships being regarded differently from heterosexual ones. Relevant adjectives in this context are *gay* and *homosexual* (including their use in coordination with *lesbian*). The distribution can be seen under Table 6.

This distribution must be considered in relation to *gay* and *homosexual* used to refer to the identity of a person (such as *men* or *people*, not a relationship) and to behaviour (such as *practice* or *conduct*), as shown under Table 7.

As other research has demonstrated (e.g., Baker, 2005) the use of *gay* is closely linked to a discourse of ‘identity’, whereas *homosexual* relates to same-sex desire being conceptualised as ‘behaviour’. This is also corroborated by my data. Interestingly, *homosexual*, though less frequent than *gay* in the debates in general (168 *versus* 288), is used considerably more often to modify ‘relationship’ words.⁸ It should be noted here, however, that *same-sex* is much more frequent than *gay* and *homosexual* together in this respect, but an analysis of *same-sex* will be postponed to my discussion of the ‘just the same relationship’ discourse. Arguably, this use of *homosexual* is a remnant of the older ‘behaviour’ discourse, which would discredit same-sex relationships by, presumably, basing them on repetition of sexual acts, and again marks a difference from heterosexual relationships, which are seemingly based on love. Incidentally, the use of *homosexual* RELATIONSHIP is most frequently, though not exclusively, used by opponents of the Bill. On the other hand, *homosexual* seems to be the most natural word to employ if a direct link is established with *heterosexual* relationships. It could also be the more formal alternative compared to *gay*.

6.2 ‘One out of many disadvantaged relationships’

Closely linked to the ‘difference’ discourse is one that posits same-sex relationships as ‘one out of many disadvantaged relationships’ in British society. Whereas the focus in the ‘difference’ discourse is on the notion that same-sex relationships are different from heterosexual relationships, the ‘one out of many disadvantaged relationships’ discourse goes further and puts same-sex ones on an equal footing with relationships between family members caring for one another, cohabiting unmarried heterosexual couples, or cohabiting spinsters. What unites these relationships, it is argued, is that they all suffer from the same injustices. The disadvantages mentioned, however, are mostly of financial character and hardly touch upon issues such as recognition or acceptance.

As already mentioned, RELATIONSHIP/PARTNERSHIP/*couples outside marriage* (26) is mainly used to criticise the Bill for ‘discriminat[ing] in favour of one particular type of relationship outside marriage’ (Mr Chope, House of Commons, 9 November 2004). This argument is strongly associated with the opponents of the Bill who try to extend its scope to include carers, *etc.* The words *discriminates*, *outside* and *marriage* are all key in the anti-side of the debates in the House of Commons.

The keyword *family* (402) is also linked to this discourse, and is especially frequent in the compounds *family* MEMBER (103) and *family* RELATIONSHIP (37). We could have anticipated that the high frequency of *family* is due to the idea that gay and lesbian relationships are considered

⁸ The difference is statistically significant: $X^2 = 47.62806, p < .001$

to be families. Thus, the debates would have contributed to the argument of recognition of gay and lesbian families. However, the high occurrence of *family* is almost exclusively linked to the question of widening the scope of a civil partnership to include family members. Recurrent patterns that revolve around that issue are a *parallel scheme for family members* (4), which is demanded, and *DISCRIMINATE/discrimination (...) against (ordinary) family members* (5). Baroness O’Cathain, the driving force behind the amendment, provides a telling example:

In summary, under the Bill same-sex couples in a civil partnership are given a higher status than family relationships. That is unfair and is certain to lead to blatant injustice against family members who all their lives have shown sacrificial love and commitment.

(Baroness O’Cathain, House of Lords, 24 June 2004)

An analysis of the keywords *inheritance* (245) and *tax* (460) reveals the following battleground. Those who tabled the various amendments to extend the scope of the Bill to other groups question the Government’s motive for introducing the Bill in the first place and imply that the Bill in its original form is a tax avoidance bill; this is strongly denied by the supporters of the Bill. It could be argued that the discussion about tax avoidance, abolition, relief, reduction and loopholes hints at an attempt to discredit the Bill and to draw the attention away from its main purpose – that is, to give same-sex couples legal recognition that is similar to married couples.

The ‘one out of many disadvantaged relationships’ discourse which is drawn on as an argumentative weapon by those trying to extend the benefits of the Bill to other groups, considerably downgrades the concept of a loving same-sex relationship being equal to a loving opposite-sex relationship. I would argue that this discourse is drawn on as a means of protecting opponents of the Bill from accusations of being homophobic; it is the Government’s position, (that civil partnership is not marriage), that opens up the possibility to argue that this is a status that other caring, committed relationships in similar situations should also have access to (see Stychin, 2006: 81). The need not to be regarded as homophobic could be seen as a reflection of an unstated ‘homophobia is bad’ discourse (as evidenced by the changes in British society, described under Section 2).

6.3 ‘Just the same relationship’

Opposing the discourses introduced so far, the more liberal ‘just the same relationship’ discourse stresses the sameness of gay, lesbian and heterosexual couples, and constructs all these relationships as (more or less) equal, notwithstanding the fact that only heterosexual couples can marry.

Again, the keyword RELATIONSHIP (1,032) serves as a starting point to see how this discourse is accessed during the debates. As mentioned above, classifying the adjectives surrounding the node RELATIONSHIP reveals that concepts of sincerity and permanence (224) are dominant in the description of relationships (*long-term* (44), *committed* (44), *stable* (40), *loving* (34), *supportive* (12), *close* (12), *caring* (12), *permanent* (11), *long-standing* (6), *faithful* (5) and *lifelong* (4)). We should bear in mind, however, that not all occurrences of RELATIONSHIP refer to same-sex relationships; family relationships or heterosexual relationships, and so on, are also discussed. Nevertheless, this characteristic of what constitutes a good and worthy relationship seems of be of utmost importance and it is (for the first time) institutionally ascribed to same-sex couples. On this basis, same-sex couples are treated as equal to heterosexual couples and, thus, it is argued, should be granted the same rights. Here is an example of how this is used in the debates:

Most of us know at least one gay couple who live together in a loving, committed relationship. Many of us also know of at least one heterosexual couple whose relationship may not be so healthy or committed.

(Mr Duncan, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

This discourse is fundamentally different to the ‘transiency’ discourse which Baker (2005: 72–3) traced in the British tabloid press—a discourse that revolves around terms such as *lovers*, *affairs* and *flings*; it depicts gay men as being promiscuous and sexual, and not leading stable and committed relationships.

Another set of adjectives modifying RELATIONSHIP is about sexual orientation (179). Relationships are classified as being *same-sex* (102), *homosexual* (31), *gay* (15), *opposite-sex* (13), *heterosexual* (10) and *lesbian* (8). Interestingly, *same-sex* is, in general, much more frequent than all other adjectives of sexual orientation, most frequently (in L1 position) referring to RELATIONSHIP (73), COUPLE (367) and PARTNERSHIP (52). I claim that *same-sex* is a relatively new concept and it illustrates that social/cultural change and language change go hand in glove. It is complementing, and perhaps even substituting, *homosexual* and *gay and lesbian* in specific areas of use. Whereas in the greater part of the twentieth century the focus was on homosexual acts and their battle for legalisation, this changed towards the turn of the century. Since then, homosexual relationships and the fight for equal rights between heterosexual and homosexual couples have become the centre of attention. I argue that the change from ‘act’ over ‘identity’ towards ‘relationship/couple’ is accompanied by a change in linguistic conventions to refer to them. Acts and identities are linked to *homosexual* and *gay*, respectively, whereas couples and relationships are described as being *same-sex*.

This use of *same-sex* has the advantage of not having the same semantic prosodies (also called discourse prosodies – that is, of carrying connotations because of frequent use in particular contexts and with particular collocations (see Sinclair, 1998; and Stubbs, 2001)) as *homosexual* and *gay*. The association of *same-sex* with terms relating to acts, behaviour, rights groups and communities is rather weak. On the other hand, the meaning of *same-sex* could also be ambiguous. It does not immediately denote that sexual activity is involved. It could also mean simply people of the same sex (as in *same-sex school*), no matter whether they in fact have a sexual and loving relationship with one another. So this might also indicate a denial of sexual activity and of a romantic relationship, perhaps because it is regarded as unpleasant; but it could also imply that the focus has moved away from sexual activity and orientation, and from sex in general, because these aspects are no longer seen as key factors in the perception of individuals in general and, in particular, in granting rights to people. It is notable that *gay* and *homosexual* both refer to identities (e.g., one can say ‘I am gay’ or ‘I am homosexual’, but one cannot say ‘*I am same-sex’). *Same-sex* thus refers to relationships rather than identity and suggests that discourses of homosexuality have shifted to place more emphasis on how people relate to one another, rather than who they are or their sexual behaviour. This view of disconnecting homosexuality and sex has also been noted by Warner (1999) who argues that it is central to gay normalisation and to granting equal rights. Richardson (2004: 9) points in the same direction and claims that in contemporary rights discourse ‘good sexual citizenship is [...] defined through association with certain intimate norms, rather than a specific sexual identity’.

The ‘just the same relationship’ discourse foregrounds the most obvious difference between gay, lesbian and heterosexual relationships, namely, that the relationship is either between people of the opposite sex or of the same sex. In all other respects, these relationships are put on an equal footing. Ironically, though, same-sex relationships have to be constructed as identical to heterosexual relationships in order to be given the same rights. Any differences that there might be, (as, for instance, in the assumed diversity in relationships propagated by queer activists), have to be disregarded. This unquestioned assimilation of heterosexual ideals and constructs into gay and lesbian life, followed by creating a hierarchy of same-sex relationships because only those gay and lesbian people (and relationships) who copy heteronormative standards are considered worthy of receiving rights, is critically called ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan, 2003). Civil partnerships can be read as an example of homonormativity. Gay and lesbian couples are given an ideal they can aspire to which is based on (heterosexual) marriage. It will be interesting to see if, in the future, civil partnerships will be as highly regarded among gay and lesbian people as marriage is (still) among heterosexual couples, where a question any couple at some point encounters is, ‘Are you two married?’

The ‘just the same relationship’ discourse could be regarded as a specification of the wider discourse of ‘equality’, which is frequently

accessed during the debates. The principle of equality is declared as the driving force behind the introduction of the Civil Partnership Bill.

6.4 ‘A thin end of the wedge’

The ‘thin end of the wedge’ discourse invokes the idea that the more rights gay and lesbian people are given, the more they demand. It is identified by Baker (2005: 52) in a series of House of Lords debates on the lowering of the age of consent for gay men which took place between 1998 and 2000. One such right that was feared to be demanded in the future was the right to marry. It is, therefore, safe to assume that a nightmare has come true for at least some people in Parliament.

A keyword used in this discourse in the debates is *marriage*, pre-modified as *gay marriage* (54), *same-sex marriage* (29) or *homosexual marriage* (14). As recurrent patterns with *gay marriage* show, the issue of whether civil partnership is gay marriage or not is highly important:

- CREATE (*a form of*) *gay marriage* (7)
- *the/this (Bill) BE not a gay marriage Bill* (5)
- *gay marriage (Bill) in all but name* (4)
- *civil partnerships BE not gay marriage* (2)

The majority of occurrences of *gay marriage* are used to express the opinion that the Bill *is* actually about gay marriage. This argument is mainly employed by those who are against the Bill, accusing the Government of hiding their real intention, which is to introduce gay marriage—a fact also recognised by the press:

Why will he not simply be honest and say that what we are creating is a form of gay marriage?

(Mr Leigh, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

It is a provision for gay marriage. It is an absolute fig leaf to pretend otherwise.

(The Lord Bishop of Chester, House of Lords, 13 May 2004)

All the newspapers call this gay marriage. I rarely quote *The Guardian*, but I shall at least quote what it said on 30 June 2003: ‘The tabloids may go wild over “gay marriages” and New Labour will no doubt shrink timidly from the phrase. But in truth, it will be a legal marriage in all but name.’

(Mr Howarth, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

And if it is not introduced now, there is the fear that it will be institutionalised in the future.

It will come and the next step will be for the gay community to insist – rightly, in their view – that gay marriage be recognised, that it should be an offence to attack homosexuality and that it should be taught in schools on equal terms. That is the agenda.

(Mr Leigh, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

Those who support the Bill mainly assert that civil partnership is not gay marriage:

We do not see it as analogous to marriage. We do not see it as a drift towards gay marriage. We see it as having value, merit, meaning and purpose in its own right.

(Lord Filkin, House of Lords, 12 May 2004)

Several hon. Members have urged us to admit that we are talking about gay marriage, but I cannot admit that because, as I explained earlier, marriage is something uniquely given to mixed-sex couples.

(Mr Carmichael, House of Commons, 9 November 2004)

A look at the concordance lines containing *drift towards* in the BNC shows that it has a tendency to be used in a negative context when it is not being used literally (examples include drift towards *complacency*, *anarchy*, *authoritarianism* and *incoherence*). The same connotation applies to *admit*, because what is commonly admitted is something that has been done secretly, that has been withheld from someone else and that is supposed to be wrongful.

From all this it can be seen that gay marriage in general is not represented by the debaters as a pleasant idea. The idea of creating gay marriage is strongly denied by the supporters of the Bill as if it were a stigma. Gay marriage is presented as only being desirable to gay rights groups. The same pattern of use can be shown for *same-sex marriage* and *homosexual marriage*. It suggests that British Parliament is not ripe for the opening up of marriage to same-sex couples. A proposal for gay marriage would not, presumably, have been given approval by Parliament. So it really is the attached label that matters as the content is very much alike.

Although the debates are about introducing civil partnership for gay and lesbian couples, a considerable amount of time is spent discussing whether this is gay marriage or not. It shows the fear for more demands to come or that these demands have been fulfilled already, secretly and sneakily, in all but name.

6.5 ‘Detrimental to society’

Another discourse accessed by the opponents of civil partnerships constructs same-sex relationships as ‘detrimental to society’ if they are officially recognised and supported. This discourse revolves around the keyword *marriage* and two of its most frequent lexical collocates, *institution* and *undermine*. The presumed attack on, but also the reinforcement of, the *institution of marriage* (33) is suggested by the lexical verbs that collocate with it: UNDERMINE (13), SUPPORT (4), *defend* (4), *protect* (4), *damage* (2), *corrode* (1), *strengthen* (1), *enhance* (1), *uphold* (1), *competing with* (1) and *reinforce* (1). UNDERMINE (24) is also the most frequently used verb in L1 position preceding *marriage*.

This claim of undermining marriage is either negated or confirmed. It is commonly accepted that everybody strives to sustain the institution of marriage. There is a fear, however, that civil partnerships might undermine it.

The unavoidable conclusion that I have reached is that the Bill is a homosexual marriage Bill in all but name. As a result, it will be a double whammy. It will further undermine the institution of marriage – the holiest state of matrimony.

(Mr Chope, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

This is denied by the advocates of the Bill, who argue that civil partnerships might actually strengthen the institution of marriage. In their view, it is the amendment that intends to allow unmarried heterosexual couples to register for such a partnership that would undermine the institution of marriage.

In order to accelerate matters slightly, will my hon. Friend advance a cogent argument to explain how including opposite-sex couples in the Bill would not undermine the institution of marriage, which he wants to protect?

(Mr Duncan, House of Commons, 19 October 2004)

Interestingly, *unique* and *uniqueness* are both key in the anti speeches in the House of Commons (when compared to the pro speeches). They are used in a similar vein, appealing to the unique status of marriage which is under attack.

If we pass it today, we will undermine the uniqueness of marriage, which is why I will oppose it at every stage.

(Miss Widdecombe, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

So marriage might be threatened, but why is this seen as detrimental to society? Having a look at the use of *society* (129) in the debates provides fruitful results. Although not among the pre-selected keywords, I decided to include *society* in my analysis because I was wondering what concepts are connected to society, how it is constructed in Parliament and why it is

viewed as under threat from the Bill. *Marriage* (8) is among the top lexical collocates; it is regarded as the *building block of society*, and thus even justifies discrimination.

Marriage is the building block of society. Over the centuries, Parliament has taken the view that we should discriminate in favour of marriage. We do not want to discriminate against anyone else—not sisters, brothers, uncles, nephews, stepsons or grandfathers, grandsons or gay people. We want to discriminate in favour of the building block that is marriage.

(Mr Leigh (Gainsborough), House of Commons,
12 October 2004)

If this building block is attacked, or undermined, by introducing civil partnerships, wider society will be harmed. And this is even more so if gay marriage (in all but name) were to be introduced:

I profoundly oppose the Bill. It will have serious consequences for our country which are as yet unfathomed. It will damage the moral fabric of our society.

(Mr Howarth, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

I agree with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that civil partnerships can be equated with marriages, which will be to the detriment of our society.

(Mr Donaldson, House of Commons, 9 November 2004)

A reason why civil partnerships would undermine marriage and be to the detriment of society is provided by Rowthorn (2002: 150), which captures the essence of the ‘transiency’ discourse:

Western society places a high premium on marriage as a life-long, sexually exclusive union and the opponents of same-sex marriage believe that homosexual couples would not subscribe to, or abide by, these rules. They would reject the ideal of life-long monogamy. They would divorce and remarry even more frequently than heterosexuals do at present and they would be highly promiscuous while married. Such attitudes and behaviour, it is claimed, would bring the institution of marriage as a whole into disrepute and undermine its value for heterosexual couples and society in general.

6.6 'Beneficial to society'

Opposing the 'detrimental to society' discourse supporters of the Civil Partnership Bill draw on the 'beneficial to society' discourse, which is formed around the argument that civil partnerships will be valuable to society, every bit the same as marriage is. The argument brought forward by the opponents of the Bill, that civil partnerships will undermine marriage, is strongly negated and the opposite is posited: the institution of marriage will benefit from civil partnerships.

I fail to see that acknowledgement of one permanent, faithful, stable relationship can undermine the status of another legally acknowledged, permanent, faithful, stable relationship. How can my marriage be undermined by someone else's civil partnership, or the other way round? Surely the more committed, stable relationships there are, the better.

(Mr Key (Salisbury), House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

The analysis of *society* reveals that it is again not just marriage which is affected but society as a whole. Stable and committed relationships as promoted by civil partnerships are regarded as beneficial to society.

As a Conservative, I believe in encouraging committed long-term relationships that strengthen society. That is one of the best reasons that I can give for supporting the Bill. For too long there has been perpetuated a negative stereotype of gay love as less committed, less stable and less valid than that between heterosexuals.

(Mr Duncan, House of Commons, 12 October 2004)

Stability can be regarded one of the ideals of society as constructed by British Parliament, which is implied by the emphasis on stable relationships and the frequent reference to stability. This has to be brought into line with the inevitable change that takes place. Civil partnerships are on the one hand seen as supporting stability in society ('beneficial to society') and, on the other hand, as undermining marriage and thus destabilising society ('detrimental to society').

7. Conclusion

It has been shown that keywords help the researcher to decide where to start the analysis of discourses. But keyword lists provide more than just a starting point. To group keywords into thematically related fields also shows what concepts are predominant (and maybe controversial) in the debates. The keywords in context reveal how they are embedded in argumentative

structures, often revealing ideological battlefields where highly repetitive language is used. The different lines of argumentation draw on different discourses of same-sex relationships, from more conservative to more liberal ones. These lines of argumentation only seem to make sense if they are based on a common, or at least widely recognised, discourse.

Such an approach to uncovering discourse has its limits. A keyword list does not group semantically similar words automatically, since only word forms are counted. Thus, *equality* is not a key keyword, but the semantic field of 'equality' is highly frequent and would be a 'key semantic field'.⁹ Keyword lists also do not display compounds; thus, *same* and *sex* are separate keywords although the keyword would be *same-sex*. This can be easily rectified manually by the researcher for such obvious terms, but surely much (maybe crucial) information will be lost due to these shortcomings. Researcher intuition still plays an important role, even if much of the ground work is done automatically.

Apart from the discourses of same-sex relationships introduced under Section 6, the discourse of 'heteronormativity' (Warner, 1991) is drawn on by all parties in the debates, providing the background to all the discourses used. 'Heteronormativity' is defined as the practices and institutions 'that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and "natural" within society' (Cohen, 2005: 24); it constructs a (married) heterosexual relationship as normative and natural, and assumes that all other relationships are different and inferior. This dominant, wide-spread, naturalised discourse in Western societies influences the construction of same-sex relationships because their recognition as legitimate relationships is a struggle against pervasive heterosexual norms. Marriage is constructed as having an unquestioned appeal, being *the* model for relationships, against which all other forms are measured. One can argue that the introduction of a different concept for gay men and lesbians which mirrors marriage reinforces 'the dominance of heterosexuality as a normatively better way of life' (Richardson, 2004: 10). Granting these relationships the status of marriage seems to be out of question, at least in the UK, at the time of writing. However, it could also be argued that the presence of new discourses that this paper has identified, surrounding the concept of same-sex relationships, may be a step towards gay marriage (or the 'thin end of the wedge'). The recent discussion of the Liberal Democrats, currently running the country in a coalition with the Conservatives, to introduce full gay marriage¹⁰ may seem to be a reflection of the latter.

⁹ The Wmatrix software (<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>) can be used to assign semantic tags to words. Key semantic tags can then be derived in the same way as keywords.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2010/jul/21/gay-marriage> (accessed September 2010)

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