

'Unnatural Acts': Discourses of homosexuality within the House of Lords debates on gay male law reform

Paul Baker

Lancaster University, United Kingdom

Between 1998 and 2000, the House of Lords in the United Kingdom debated and rejected a Bill to equalise the age of sexual consent for gay men with the age of consent for heterosexual sex at sixteen years. A corpus-based keywords analysis of these debates uncovered the main lexical differences between oppositional stances, and helped to shed light on the ways that discourses of homosexuality were constructed by the Lords. In the debates the word *homosexual* was associated with acts, whereas *gay* was linked to identities. Those who argued in favour of law reform focused on a discourse of equality and tolerance, while those who were against law reform constructed homosexuality by accessing discourses linking it to danger, ill health, crime and unnatural behaviour. The discussion focuses on the ways that discourses can be constructed via chains of argumentation.

KEYWORDS: Gay, consent, law, corpus, keywords

BACKGROUND: THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND U.K. LAW REFORM ON HOMOSEXUALITY

In the United Kingdom, the role of the House of Lords¹ is to play:

... an important part in **revising legislation** and keeping a check on Government by **scrutinising** its activities... They have a wide range of experience and provide a source of **independent expertise**.

House of Lords briefing 2002b: 1, bold print reproduced

One area in which the House of Lords has traditionally opposed the government concerns legislation to change the U.K.'s laws relating to homosexuality. For example, a contested issue that was debated by the Lords was the age of consent for gay men. While the age of consent for heterosexual intercourse is 16 (except for heterosexual anal sex, which is legal at 18), the age of consent was set at 21 for homosexual intercourse (including both anal and oral sex as well as mutual masturbation, the latter two generally referred to under law by

the phrase 'gross indecency') on July 27, 1967. On February 24, 1994, MPs voted to lower the age of consent for homosexual sex to 18, although the question of equalisation returned to Parliament in 1998. During three debates, which took place on July 22, 1998, April 13, 1999 and November 13, 2000, the House of Lords rejected a Bill to equalise the age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual sex to 16 years. The Bill was eventually passed by the House of Commons on November 30, 2000.

This article describes a corpus-based analysis of the language that was used in these debates, focusing on how discourses of homosexuality were constructed by the participants, in particular by concentrating on the lexical items that were most frequently used by opposing groups. Discourse analysts have used corpora in order to analyse texts such as political speeches (Flowerdew 1997; Fairclough 2000; Piper 2000) and to uncover ideologies and evidence for disadvantage (see Hunston 2002: 109–123 for a summary). It is the intention of this paper to closely examine the language that was most distinctly characteristic of the two sides of the debate over the age of consent in the House of Lords. I take a broader discourse analysis rather than a critical discourse analysis view, influenced by the work of Stubbs (2001), although I acknowledge that there are overlaps between these two approaches.²

DATA

The data under study consists of three electronic transcripts of House of Lords debates, from the 1998, 1999 and 2000 debates on the age of consent, consisting in total of 111,501 words.³ These texts were annotated with a code of 1–4 according to the stance of the speakers on law reform related to homosexuality. The first two debates resulted in a vote, so for almost all of the speakers, it was possible to determine their position in the debates (whether for (1), or against (2), law reform), either by checking how they voted, and/or by looking through the content of their speeches for remarks such as 'I am/am not opposed to reform'. Another category (3) was created for people who were undecided about law reform or who abstained from voting, although this group was relatively small (937 words). A final category (4) was applied to parts of the debate which were not related to discussing law reform but which touched upon procedural matters, such as who should get to speak next or how long should be spent debating the reform. Again, this type of meta-discussion constitutes only a small part of the debate (3,383 words). Therefore, the majority of text under analysis focused on the presentation of positions that were either for (1), or against (2), law reform regarding homosexuality. Of these two stances, 50,476 words consisted of pro-reform debate, while 56,705 words were spoken by the anti-reformers. As this was a relatively large body of data, a corpus-based comparison of the two sets of texts was performed, in order to determine the most significant differences between opposing points of view.

When carrying out corpus analysis on a particular language genre or register, it is often useful to compare findings to a larger, more representative sample of general language use. Therefore, in addition to using the House of Lords data, I have also drawn on the 100 million word British National Corpus (BNC) (Aston and Burnard 1998). The BNC has been used in order to determine the usual collocational patterns (see Firth 1957) of a number of words that occur frequently in certain parts of the House of Lords debates allowing us to discover implicit assumptions or loadings that are embedded within different lexical items. A related concept to collocation is the idea of *semantic preference* (Stubbs 2001: 64–66), also referred to as *semantic prosody* by Sinclair (1991) and Louw (1993). Semantic preference occurs when a lexical item collocates with a number of words or phrases that share the same semantic trait. For example, Sinclair (1991: 112) shows that the verb *happen* often collocates with a set of lexical items that semantically refer to unpleasant events. However, due to limitations of space, the method of analysis used in this paper is mainly concerned with keywords and their collocations.

KEYWORDS

Using the corpus analysis software WordSmith Tools (Scott 2001), the text which contained speeches from those who were opposed to law reform was compared to the speeches from the pro-reformers, in order to determine the keywords of both types of speech. Scott's (1999) notion of keywords is 'Any word which is found to be outstanding in its frequency in the text is considered "key"'. Using WordSmith Tools, keywords can be found by comparing two texts together. Either a smaller text (usually of a particular genre) is compared against a larger 'benchmark' corpus, such as the BNC, or two texts of a similar size are compared against each other. It was this second methodology that was carried out on the House of Lords texts.⁴ Two wordlists, containing the frequencies of all of the words used on both sides of the debate were created and then a keywords comparison was carried out, using these lists, in order to ascertain which words appeared significantly more often on one side of the debate, as opposed to the other, based on the total number of words in each text.

Keywords were obtained by cross-tabulating frequencies of all lexical items against each other and the total word lengths of the two sets of data and then subjecting the frequencies of each lexical item to a log-likelihood test (the *p* value was set at 0.0005).⁵ A word is therefore key if it appears unusually frequently in one text, when compared to the other; a *keyness* score shows how strong a given keyword is.

Keywords are important because they reveal the most significant lexical differences or features in a text or between texts. They therefore act as lexical signposts, revealing what producers of a text have chosen to focus on. An analysis of keywords, for example, by studying concordances of how they occur in

context, by looking at common collocations that occur with such words, both in the texts under study, and in a reference corpus, and by looking at frequent word clusters or phrasal patterns that keywords occur in, should help to reveal some of the most important embedded discourse traces or assumptions within a text.

When comparing the pro- and anti-homosexual law reform speeches in the House of Lords, forty-one words were found to be keywords – sixteen of which were more frequently used by the pro-reformers and twenty-five of which occurred more often in the speech of those opposed to reform (see Tables 1 and 2 – the words are presented in order of keyword strength or keyness).

DISCOURSES OF HOMOSEXUALITY

An analysis of the keywords reveals the different ways in which the debaters chose to frame their arguments, to argue either for or against reform. Although these keywords act as pointers towards some of the most frequently accessed (and therefore significant) discourses associated with homosexuality and law reform, it is necessary to carry out a closer analysis of how these words occur in the context of the debate in order to understand how they contribute towards such discourses.

Table 1: Keywords in the pro-reform speeches. Numbers in brackets show relative frequencies per 1000 words

Word	Frequency in pro-reform speeches	Frequency in anti-reform speeches	Level of keyness
law	218 (4.32)	93 (1.64)	67.5
she	89 (1.76)	22 (0.39)	51.6
baroness	174 (3.45)	82 (1.45)	45.5
criminal	78 (1.55)	24 (0.42)	36.8
harm	31 (0.61)	3 (0.05)	30.2
convention	22 (0.44)	2 (0.04)	21.9
rights	61 (1.21)	24 (0.42)	21.3
sexuality	42 (0.83)	14 (0.25)	18.1
reform	11 (0.22)	0 (0)	16.6
nothing	20 (0.40)	3 (0.05)	16.1
association	28 (0.55)	7 (0.12)	16.1
her	64 (1.27)	31 (0.55)	15.9
tolerance	10 (0.20)	0 (0)	15.1
orientation	30 (0.59)	9 (0.16)	14.5
sexual	123 (2.44)	82 (1.45)	13.7
human	60 (1.19)	32 (0.56)	12.2

Table 2: Keywords in the anti-reform speeches. Numbers in brackets show relative frequencies per 1000 words

Word	Frequency in anti-reform speeches	Frequency in pro-reform speeches	Level of keyness
buggery	60 (1.06)	8 (0.16)	39.2
age	354 (6.24)	186 (3.68)	35.6
lowered	25 (0.44)	0 (0)	31.8
anal	84 (1.48)	23 (0.46)	30.3
subsection	18 (0.32)	0 (0)	22.9
indecenty	23 (0.41)	1 (0.02)	22.5
at	303 (5.34)	179 (3.55)	19.6
vaginal	15 (0.26)	0 (0)	19.1
act	84 (1.48)	32 (0.63)	18.5
percent	45 (0.79)	11 (0.22)	18.4
compromise	14 (0.25)	0 (0)	17.8
blood	14 (0.25)	0 (0)	17.8
intercourse	83 (1.46)	33 (0.65)	16.9
gross	18 (0.32)	1 (0.02)	16.6
wolfenden	17 (0.30)	1 (0.02)	15.4
commit	12 (0.21)	0 (0)	15.3
lowering	43 (0.76)	12 (0.24)	15.1
lining	11 (0.19)	0 (0)	14.0
page	11 (0.19)	0 (0)	14.0
demand	11 (0.19)	0 (0)	14.0
sensitive	11 (0.19)	0 (0)	14.0
condom	10 (0.18)	0 (0)	12.7
greatly	10 (0.18)	0 (0)	12.7
girls	77 (1.36)	34 (0.67)	12.5

Identities or acts?

Although the words *gay* and *homosexual* occurred frequently in the debates, they were not keywords in either set of texts. However, as they were important concepts, it is useful to begin the analysis by an examination of how they were commonly used. Within the debates as a whole, the word *gay* occurred 115 times (*gays* occurred 4 times), while *homosexual* occurred 305 times and *homosexuals* appeared 81 times. As Table 3 shows, while *homosexual(s)* tended to occur more than *gay(s)* overall, this phenomenon was more marked in the language used by the anti-reformers. Some anti-reformers specifically noted that they disapproved of the current use of *gay*:

I have never liked the use of the word 'gay' in this context. It is an old English girl's name. I do not mind 'homosexual'.

Lord Selsdon, April 13, 1999

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

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

A collocational analysis reveals some of the most common ways that the words *gay* and *homosexual* are used in context. Overall, the most frequent right hand collocates (e.g. words which appear directly one place *after* the target word) of *homosexual* in the House of Lords texts are *acts* (30), *activity* (22) and *consent* (28), while for *gay*, the strongest right hand collocates are *people* (20) and *men* (16). Therefore, in these debates, *homosexual* seems to be framed more often as a behaviour, whereas *gay* is an identity or trait. Other collocates of *homosexual* include *act* (8), *sex* (7), *behaviour* (7), *offences* (4), *practices* (4) and *intercourse* (4).

Of the keywords used by those who were against reform, a number of them are linked to sexual acts: *intercourse*, *buggery* and the phrase *gross indecency*. In addition, the keywords *anal* and *vaginal* both collocate with *intercourse* and *sex* almost every time they are used, causing them to also refer to sexual activity. The keyword *act* is also used to refer to sex, although in twenty out of a possible eighty-four cases, this word refers to Government Acts. The phrase *act of buggery* occurs eleven times in the anti-reform speeches, *act of gross indecency* occurs ten times and *act of sodomy* occurs four times. Buggery and sodomy are both used to mean 'anal sex'.

The phrase *homosexual act* also occurs four times. One Lord explicitly states that homosexuality is an act (rather than, say, an orientation):

Many believe the act of homosexuality to be unnatural and say that it should not be permitted at all.

Lord Davies of Coity, November 13, 2000

Therefore, a discourse that the anti-reform Lords have accessed is one that links homosexuality to external *acts* or *behaviours*, rather than one that defines homosexuality as being an internal part of one's identity. On the other hand, the pro-reform Lords, in linking the more recently coined term *gay* with a high use of keywords like *sexual orientation* or *sexuality*, do not focus on sexual acts, and instead reference a discourse of 'internalised gay identity'.

Pro-reform: A discourse of tolerance

One discourse which is accessed by the pro-reformers, is based around the keywords *convention*, *rights* and *human*:

In my view the Government are acting wisely in trying to put beyond doubt the outcome of this issue before the United Kingdom is exposed to the ridicule of a court decision requiring it to comply with the European Convention on Human Rights . . . If we do not pass this legislation, when the Human Rights Act is brought into operation we will be required by British courts in all probability to comply with the legislation.

Lord Warner, 13 April, 1999

This discourse presents an ostensibly neutral view of homosexuality, although reference to 'human rights' via Europe implicitly makes the point that the current laws are in violation of them (at least as far as Europe is concerned). However, Lord Warner (and others) argue that reform may as well go ahead because it is going to be imposed upon the U.K. in any case – the word *required*, although not a keyword, collocates strongly with both the keywords *convention* and *rights*.

However, looking at other pro-reform keywords, interestingly, the words *criminal* and *law* tended to occur together. The fact that the law criminalises gay men who are aged 16 and 17, is often used as one of the main arguments for reform:

We do not ask Members of the Committee to approve of homosexuality or homosexual acts, or even to understand why they happen, but to remove the weight and penalty of the criminal law from those young men aged 16 and 17 who consent to have sex with other men.

Lord Alli, 13 November, 2000

The pro-reform speeches also contain the keywords *reform*, *rights* and *tolerance*. They point out that a number of expert groups or *associations* (also a keyword) have supported the Bill (notably the British Medical Association and the Family Welfare Association). The keywords *sexuality*, *sexual* and *orientation* occur more often (the latter two usually collocating together in the phrase *sexual orientation*), again suggesting that the pro-reformers are more concerned with constructing people in terms of their identity rather than their behaviour than are the anti-reformers. The word *harm* occurs more often because it is used to argue against one of the anti-reformers' points about homosexual law reform, that homosexual acts are likely to cause harm to the people who engage in them.

There might, however, be stronger arguments about self-harm and harm to others, but I doubt it. I do not wish to deny that self-harm and harm to others can constitute strong arguments for treating one group differently from another. What I am saying is that I do not think the empirical case in relation to such harm has been made.

Lord Plant of Highfield, April 13, 1999

The pro-reformers' use of the keyword *nothing* occurs 45 percent of the time as part of the phrase 'nothing to do with' (Table 4). This is used to negate anti-arguments that connect lowering the age of consent to other issues such as political correctness, morals, age, or liking/disliking people who are gay.

Table 4: Concordance of *nothing* in the pro-reform speeches

1	hat we are here for – we would lose	nothing	-I hope that we shall give the Bill
2	this debate is not concerned. It has	nothing	at all to do with political correct
3	rd, Lord Dholakia, pointed out that	nothing	has changed. It has. For instan
4	rt to the noble Lord's comment that	nothing	has changed. That is not so. Y
5	or that determination in each other.	Nothing	I intend to say will in any way
6	ed and put into prison. And so I did	nothing	. I was discouraged from reporti
7	l. I agree with that too. But there is	nothing	inconsistent with parents prefer
8	them. But if they are designed to do	nothing	more than water down the Bill
9	amendment, restoring equality and	nothing	more – we shall disable the Gov
10	ced in your Lordships' House. I see	nothing	procedurally wrong in that. In fa
11	it is now and we will have achieved	nothing	The alternative is to let this B
12	ers positively desirable, but that has	nothing	to do with whether the state sh
13	ms others. Liking and disliking has	nothing	to do with it. So what kind of
14	how I feel. The teachers did next to	nothing	to help. Some education would
15	sonal political moral courage. It has	nothing	to do with political correctness,
16	ing ourselves this evening. This is	nothing	to do with age but it may have
17	bscribe to the view that the law has	nothing	to do with morals; the law can
18	not see why I need to know; it has	nothing	to do with me. I do not really w
19	ual practices in private because it is	nothing	to do with me. A great deal of t
20	thority over them? That inquiry has	nothing	to do with this amendment. B

The fact that we do not much like what someone else is doing is not a ground for preventing him or her from doing it in a free society unless it harms others. Liking and disliking has nothing to do with it.

Lord Plant of Highfield, April 13, 1999

The keywords *baroness*, *she* and *her* were most often used to refer to Baroness Young, who tabled amendments to the Bill that the House of Commons was trying to pass, and again were used in speeches that set out to directly counter her arguments. Therefore, in addition to creating a unified discourse of homosexuality which emphasises equality in society, tolerance and human rights, a number of the pro-reform speeches are taken up with challenging a set of connected discourses put forward by the anti-reformers. It is these discourses, and their associated keywords that I wish to examine in more detail, as they reveal a more varied and complex set of attitudes towards homosexuality than those of the pro-reformers.

'A criminal behaviour'

If the pro-reform speakers drew on discourses of human rights and equality to support their argument, what opposing discourses were accessed by the anti-reform speakers?

Referencing homosexuality as an act rather than an identity is essential for those who are anti-reform in that it disassociates criminality from a particular identity group and instead focuses it around a behaviour. It is easier to base definitions of criminality around behaviours or acts rather than around social groups.

During the debates there are references to *anal intercourse* (78), *buggery* (68), *gross indecency* (19), *anal sex* (19) and *sodomy* (8). *Buggery* is the strongest keyword used by the anti-reform debators, and related keywords include *anal*, *intercourse*, *gross* and *indecency*. The phrase *gross indecency* was used in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act which states 'Any male person who, in public or in private, commits, or is party to the commission of, or procures, or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency shall be guilty of misdemeanour, and being convicted shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour'.

The labelling of sexual activity between two men as *gross indecency*, therefore accesses a criminalising discourse from over 100 years ago and implies that there is still something criminal about a decriminalised act. Of the nineteen references to gross indecency, eighteen of them were made by the anti-reformers. What is notable, is that the phrase *gross indecency* is not used by some of the anti-repeal Lords to refer to criminal sex acts (such as rape or a man exposing himself in a public place) but to refer to gay male sex itself.

I do not accept that acts of anal intercourse or gross indecency of a homosexual kind are as natural as normal heterosexual relations.

Lord Cope of Berkeley, April 13, 1999

Therefore, the language used to talk about gay male sex suggests that those who are against reform have already judged it to be wrong. *Gross indecency* euphemistically acts as a vague phrase which does not directly reference sex or homosexuality, yet it dysphemistically refers to gay sex as being *indecent* (a word which collocates in the 100 million word British National Corpus with *buggery*, *assault*, *obscene*, *rape*, *offence*, *guilty* and *accused*).

In the House of Lords debates, in all twelve uses of the keyword *commit*, this word refers to sex, and in ten of these, specifically to gay sex. For example: *commit buggery* and *commit anal intercourse* both occur three times, *commit sexual activity* occurs twice, while *commit sexual acts*, *commit acts of gross indecency*, *commit an act of buggery* and *commit an act of gross indecency* all occur once. The verb lemma⁶ COMMIT collocates strongly in the spoken section of the British National Corpus with the words *suicide*, *incest*, *crimes* and *offence*. Therefore, although the word *commit* does not necessarily mean *crime*, when we look at how it is widely used in society, we find that it often shows a *semantic preference* for criminality (see also Stubbs 2001: 64–66). So to commit buggery is implicitly associated with being a criminal, even though the 1885 Act was partially over-turned in 1967 with the Sexual Offences Act which

decriminalised homosexual sex acts (for men aged over 21). However, some Lords still choose to refer to anal sex in terms of a criminalised discourse:

As regards human rights, I do not believe that there is any human right to commit buggery.

Baroness Young, April 13, 1999

Lord Selsdon draws on a discourse from the 1940s, when buggery was still a crime:

I was brought up on a farm at the end of the war. . . I had the doubtful privilege of learning about life in the raw, all the activities of the animals, and that two bulls might try to do something to each other. On a shelf in the library one of the books was called *The Police Constable's Guide to his Daily Work*. . . The first item was 'The abominable crime of buggery'. I did not know what buggery was. I consulted the farmworkers and they explained to me that this was an unnatural act, either between two men or between a man and an animal. It was effectively bestial.

Lord Selsdon, April 13, 1999

Lord Selsdon goes on to say that buggery is an 'abominable act' and 'in general, it is brought about by lust, not by love'. In addition, buggery is something that people can be 'subjected to' (Lord Davies of Coity, April 13, 1999) and it is a 'dangerous practice' (Baroness Blatch, November 13, 2000).

'Danger and ruin'

A related discourse to that of homosexuality as an act rather than an identity, is linked to the anti-reformers' belief that the act most commonly associated with homosexuality, anal sex, will lead to danger and ruin. For example, the guidelines on giving blood are quoted several times, as a reason why anal sex is dangerous (the word *blood* being a keyword in the anti-reform texts):

. . . the U.K. blood transfusion service leaflet states categorically: 'If you are a man who's had sex with another man, even 'safe sex' using a condom, you should never give blood'. Those . . . examples certainly convince me that we should take no steps that could increase the health risk to young people.

Lord Davies of Coity, November 13, 2000

Another aspect of the dangers of anal sex is HIV/AIDS (which is referred to 40 times by the anti-reformers and 23 times by the pro-reformers). The word *condom* is a keyword in the anti-reform speeches, and is almost always used to refer to the possibility that condoms can break during sex (or that people won't wear them):

' . . . we are designed with a nearly impenetrable barrier between the bloodstream and the extraordinarily toxic and infectious contents of the bowel. Anal intercourse creates a breach in this barrier for the receptive partner, whether or not the insertive partner is wearing a condom'. The suggestion is that the ultra tough condom will suit the bill. Everyone knows that the ultra tough condom

will not be worn. No condom is often the case because, as has been said, some people delight in taking the risk.

Lord Ackner, November 13, 2000

It is not the intention of this paper to dispute the medical evidence that the Lords cite, although it should be pointed out that in some cases, this evidence is simply an opinion – for example, not everyone *knows* that an ultra-strong condom will not be worn, as Lord Ackner states. In addition, it is possible to cite other studies which suggest that condoms give effective protection against HIV when used correctly (e.g. Feldblum et al. 1995).

It is unexpected to see the word *girls* appear as a keyword in the anti-reform speeches, particularly as the age of consent Bill is primarily concerned with bringing the age of consent for gay *males* in line with everybody else. *Boys*, which is not key, occurs 119 times in the debate (51 times by pro-reform speakers and 68 times by anti-reform speakers). *Girls*, on the other hand, occurs slightly less frequently across the debate, but significantly more frequently in the speech of the anti-reformers (see Table 2). There appear to be two main reasons why girls are mentioned frequently by the anti-reformers, both of which are linked to different types of danger.

First, there is the assertion that the Bill involves the lowering of consent for anal sex for females aged 16 as well as males. Note that the anti-reformer's use of the word *girls* is particularly emotive, accessing ideas about children having sex, whereas in fact the debate concerns people aged 16 and 17 who are considered old enough under British law to get married, have heterosexual sex and smoke tobacco. In addition, by referencing females, those who position themselves against a change to the age of consent argue that they are against anal intercourse, rather than being against gay people *per se*.

It is not a question of homophobia; it is a question of people having a differing view. I believe that we should continue to protect young people between the ages of 16 and 18 from being seduced into what is undoubtedly an unnatural practice and one which may have an enormous and possibly detrimental effect on them for the rest of their lives.

Lord Stoddart of Swindon, July 22, 1998

Both teenage boys and girls will now be exposed to all the risks of anal intercourse; they will be far more likely to run the risk of AIDS.

Baroness Young, April 13, 1999

A number of other words are also connected to this discourse of danger to girls and boys. For example, the keyword *lining* is an important concept within this discourse, being used in an argument against lowering the age of consent, because of the apparent damage that anal sex can cause.

As the noble Lord, Lord Quirk, pointed out in a previous debate, the rectum is lined with a delicate gut epithelium, or lining, which is only one cell thick, measuring a

very small fraction of a millimetre. That is in marked contrast to the lining of the vagina, which is a tough skin-like structure many cells thick. As the rectal lining is so delicate, it is frequently damaged by intercourse and therefore infected with a variety of hostile germs, the most severe being AIDS, hepatitis and a virus leading to anal cancer, together with the usual venereal diseases of syphilis, gonorrhoea and other infections. . . . In addition to the damage to the lining of the rectum, the tight and powerful muscles that surround the anal canal can also be damaged and those subjected to persistent damage can even become incontinent.

Lord McColl of Dulwich, November 13, 2000

Anal intercourse is described as something that has 'appalling' and 'frightening' 'health risks' and 'medical dangers' associated with it. It is also something that became legal for men and women to 'indulge in' from the age of 18 since 1994. An analysis of *indulge*, *risk* and *danger* shows the clearly negative concepts associated with anal sex by the anti-reformers. The verb lemma INDULGE occurs 15 times in the debates, and in all cases but one, refers to anal sex (the exception refers to blackmail). Although INDULGE does not collocate strongly with any words in the spoken section of the British National Corpus, in the written section it strongly collocates with *whims*, *idle* and *luxury*, suggesting that it carries with it a semantic preference for unnecessary pleasure.

The lemma RISK, although not key, occurs 94 times in the debates, with almost all of the 61 cases of use by anti-reformers referring to anal sex. Similarly, the lemma DANGER occurs 75 times in the debates, always referring to anal sex in the 53 cases where it is used by the anti-reformers. The pro-reformers never use it in this way, except on a couple of occasions to deny or play down the extent of the danger. The 'danger' of anal sex is also compared to the dangers of other activities such as smoking tobacco:

A dispute arose between my noble friend Lord McColl, who made an extremely important speech on the medical dangers of anal intercourse – the statistics he gave on smoking and anal sex and the shortening of young people's lives as a consequence of those activities should be remembered by us all.

Baroness Young, November 13, 2000

However, a second discourse which involves the use of the keyword *girls*, states that boys need to be protected because they are *less* mature than girls:

There is no doubt that girls mature much earlier than boys. Boys very often are only just coming to terms with their sexuality at 16. Consequently, I accept that there is more of a case for the age of consent for girls to be lower than for boys.

Baroness Seccombe, April 13, 1999

In addition, one Lord, arguing from a 'feminist' standpoint, claims that boys are 'ruined for life' by being seduced, but girls are not:

. . . if someone seduced my daughter it would be damaging and horrifying but not fatal. She would recover, marry and have lots of children (as some such people do). On the other hand, if some elderly, or not so elderly, schoolmaster seduced one of my

sons and taught him to be a homosexual, he would ruin him for life. That is the fundamental distinction. I must repeat my conviction: as regards rent boys (about which I know, not from first-hand but second-hand experience) one can ruin a person for life by treating him as a homosexual object when he is in his teens. I draw a distinction. There is no doubt about that distinction. I am sorry if the feminists – I always call myself a feminist – say there is no distinction. There must be a distinction because of the point I made. A girl is not ruined for life by being seduced. A young fellow is. That is the distinction.

Lord Longford, July 22, 1998

Therefore, not only is the anal lining in danger of being ‘ruined’ by anal intercourse (leading to incontinence), but also the reputations (of boys) can be ruined as well. Incidentally, Lord Longford does not mention the gender of the person who hypothetically seduces his daughter. So either he is suggesting that a woman who is seduced by another woman will ‘recover’ and go on to live a heterosexual life (*ergo* lesbian seduction does not have the same long-term consequences as gay male seduction), or he assumes that the only people who carry out seductions are male.

The two discourses of ruin, based around girls, do not sit comfortably with each other. On the one hand, anti-reform is justified as not homophobic because it will result in danger to girls as well as boys. But on the other, girls aren’t seen as being as much at risk because they are ‘more mature’ and not ‘ruined for life’ if ‘seduced’.

‘Unnatural and abnormal’

As well as being described as dangerous, anal sex is positioned in relation to ‘normal’ sex, the implication being that in not being normal, anal sex must be something else:

The amendment draws a clear distinction between what I shall call normal, usual intercourse and anal intercourse.

Lord Davies of Coity, November 13, 2000

In addition, Baroness Young describes marriage as the ‘normal way of living’ (April 13, 1999), Lord Stoddart of Swindon (July 22, 1998) notes that he does not dislike people who are ‘of a different sexual orientation from the normal’ and Lord Cope of Berkeley (April 13, 1999) talks about ‘normal heterosexual relations’. At the same time, the age of sixteen is said to be a ‘really difficult age, bringing new ideas, new feelings, and perhaps the urge to experiment’. Baroness Trumpington (July 22, 1998) describes this as ‘normal’. So experimenting while young is normal, so long as such experiments come to an end, and heterosexual relations follow on. If we expect heterosexuality to be classed as normal, then we could perhaps expect its oppositional state, homosexuality, to be called *abnormal*. However, this does not appear to be the case. Instead,

homosexuality, or acts associated with it, are more likely to be referred to as *unnatural* (46 times), as opposed to *abnormal* (5 times).

In framing the debate in terms of acts, rather than identities, those who are opposed to reform also access a 'love the sinner, hate the sin' discourse. For example, Lord Longford (April 13, 1999) says 'Practising homosexuals are in sin', while Lord Stallard argues that being against homosexual practices is not homophobic:

I am a practising Christian. Christians are not homophobic – along with most genuine religions – but we are against homosexual practices. That is our genuine belief.

Lord Stallard, April 13, 1999

Another discourse of homosexuality frames it as an illness, allowing for the possibility of recovery:

Of course I have seen people recover from homosexuality. A boy at Eton assaulted my elder brother in the bath there and was later expelled for repeating the offence on another boy. Later he became a pillar of county society and captained the county cricket team. So one can undoubtedly recover from homosexuality.

Lord Longford, April 13, 1999

'The thin end of the wedge'

Finally, the keyword *demand* is used in a 'thin end of the wedge' discourse by those against reform, to imply that the more 'rights' gay people acquire, the more they will want. Such a discourse therefore implicitly acknowledges that other areas exist where there is inequality in the law between heterosexual and homosexual people.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives a number of distinctions of the word *demand*. It can mean to ask for a thing peremptorily, imperiously or urgently. But it can also mean to ask for something with legal right or authority, to claim something one is legally or rightfully entitled to. Yet in the British National Corpus, strong collocates of the lemma DEMAND include *menaces*, *imperiously*, *ransom*, *indignantly*, *unlawfully*, *kidnappers*, *irritably* and *angrily*. So while the semantic preference of 'imperiousness' seems to occur in actual language use as the dictionary definition suggests, the claim that DEMAND typically occurs when someone has a legal right to make a demand is actually refuted by the corpus data. Instead we find that it occurs with words like *unlawfully*, *kidnappers* and *ransom* – words that imply a *lack* of a legal right for something.

I believe that this is the thin end of the wedge. I know that many homosexual organisations say that they are not in favour of lowering the age of consent to 14, but some are. It will lead to a demand for gay and lesbian marriages and for the right for such couples to adopt children. I understand that the Government are already considering repealing Clause 28...

Baroness Young, November 13, 2000

The word *message*, although not key, also occurs as part of this discourse. As well as enabling 16 and 17 year olds to have anal sex, the change to the law will 'send out an astonishing message to young people' (Baroness Secombe, April 13, 1999).

'Pressures are at work to legitimise any and every lifestyle irrespective of any difference of value and quality between them'. That, with all respect to the noble Baroness, Lady Mallalieu, is the kind of wrong message which I judge it is right to oppose.

The Lord Bishop of Winchester, July 22, 1998

Therefore, if anal sex is legalised, while that in itself will be 'dangerous' and allow an 'unnatural' practice to occur, it will also lead to further 'demands' for equality, and it will send out the 'wrong' message that will legitimise homosexuality as being 'in some way equal' to heterosexuality. The consequences of reform are therefore framed as affecting more than just 16 and 17 year olds who want to have anal sex. Therefore, the 'thin end of the wedge' discourse somewhat contradicts the discourse that locates the debate as being just about the act of anal sex, as gay people are seen as wanting 'rights' such as being able to marry or adopt children.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps we should not be surprised that there are so many references to anal sex during the debate. The proposed Bill is not to legalise gay male sex *per se*, but to change the age of consent for anal sex from 18 to 16. However, we need to closely examine the link between acts and identities in relationship to homosexuality.

The term *homosexual identity*, as Cass (1983: 108) notes, is often used in a haphazard fashion, having (at least) five possible meanings.⁷ Gleason (1983: 918) points out that the more general term *identity* is relatively new, emerging in social science literature in the 1950s and made popular by the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson.⁸ For Gleason, most definitions of *identity* tend to fall into one of two opposing conceptions. In one sense, identity can be called 'intrapsychic' in that it comes from within, is fixed and stable and is what people speak of when they talk about 'who we really are'. For example, John is male because he possesses a penis. On the other hand identity can be 'acquired' in that it is a conscious or internalised adoption of socially imposed, or socially constructed roles. Therefore, it could be argued that having a male identity involves much more than possessing a penis – it involves how people act, walk and talk, what they wear, etc. In addition, someone can be said to identify as 'a medical doctor' because he/she has been to medical school and now works as a GP. A doctor is still a doctor, however, even when he/she is not at work – the identity may not be 'active', but it is still there. So an activity or behaviour does not have to be carried out constantly for it to constitute an identity.

One trait unites all gay men together – perhaps it is the only trait that they can all be said to share – and that is attraction (physical and romantic) to other men. How this attraction manifests itself can vary across individuals. Not all gay men have anal sex (and not all men who have anal sex identify as gay). However, despite this, anal sex has become one of the main signifiers of homosexuality, particularly in homophobic discourses.

Homosexual identities have never been made explicitly illegal, only homosexual acts, and, specifically, a set of sex acts. For example, we might argue that talking in Polari – a form of 'gay language' (Baker 2002) – could be seen as a homosexual (speech) act. Yet Polari was never made illegal – only homosexual behaviours based around actual sexual activity have had this status.

However, in practice, the criminal status of homosexual acts has often been extended towards anyone who owned or was suspected of owning a homosexual identity, regardless of whether or not they had sexual relationships (see Jivani 1997: 137–138; David, 1997: 165). Therefore, it is in the interests of the anti-reformers, to stress that the debate is only about the 'dangers' of anal sex, while downplaying the fact that, in the past, the criminalisation of sexual acts has had far-reaching consequences on the group of people who have been associated with such acts, including people who never have anal sex. By disassociating the link between behaviour and identity, the Lords do not acknowledge that, for a large proportion of society, the two are inextricably linked.

Because of the use of nineteenth century phrases such as *gross indecency* and the fact that the Lords were debating the change of a law which was passed in 1967, some of the discourses that appeared during the House of Lords debate could be classed as coming from a different age. The average age of a Lord at the time of the last debate was 67 years (Cracknell 2000: 10). While old age does not equal old ways of thinking, the age of the House of Lords was criticised by gay rights groups who characterised the Lords as being out of touch with society.

The arguments used by the anti-reform debaters could be said to form a chain which justifies opposition to reform as not homophobic: (1) homosexuality is an act, rather than an identity; (2) the prototypical act of homosexuality is anal sex; and (3) anal sex is a dangerous, criminal and unnatural indulgence. These three arguments are strongly linked. For example, the idea that gay male sex is a criminal behaviour hinges on the assumption that one is dealing with a practice or act rather than with a social identity.

Also, by constructing the subject in terms of acts, the anti-reform debators are able to broaden the scope of the debate to include heterosexual women. *Ergo*: (4) both boys and girls can be ruined by anal sex; and (5) opposition to anal sex is therefore not homophobic. However, certain anti-reform arguments do not fit into the chain as well, for example: (6) boys are more at risk than girls (which does not match the arguments in 4 and 5); and (7) lowering the age of consent is the thin end of the wedge leading to demands for rights for gay people (which does not match the arguments in 1 and 5).

On the other hand, the discourses used by the pro-reformers were more straightforward and did not require an interrelated yet contradictory chain of argumentation. They either argued for tolerance and equality, or warned that the government would be forced to make the change in order to fall in line with European human rights conventions.

Perhaps we should note again that the House of Lords describes itself as 'a source of independent expertise', and while it no longer has the power to prevent Government Acts from being passed, the opinions of the Lords, which are widely reported, represent hegemonic, if not majority discourses. At the time of writing, the House continues to delay legislation designed to make the status of homosexual people equal to that of heterosexuals (for example, the repeal of Clause 28).

Using corpus-based approaches to sociolinguistics based on keywords has therefore been useful in uncovering the main lexical differences between the two sides of the debate. However, qualitative interpretations of the ways that these words were used in context were also required in order to make sense of the findings. Corpus analysis is, therefore, a useful, and often under-applied tool available to linguists working from a social perspective, although we should not underestimate the importance of the human analyst in explaining quantitative patterns.

NOTES

1. See Cracknell (2000) and House of Lords (2000a, b) for information on the workings of the House of Lords and its relationship to Parliament.
2. I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who submitted comments on this paper and greatly improved it as a result.
3. This data was collected from the U.K. Government's web service at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/>
4. Initially, I compared both sets of House of Lords texts against the 1 million word FLOB corpus of written English. However, the resulting keywords in both lists were similar to each other (for example, the words *noble*, *I*, *Lord*, *Bill*, *Young*, *that*, *homosexual* and *amendment* appeared within the top ten keywords for both lists). This reflected the fact that both texts came from the same context, rather than illuminating differences in position. It was decided then, that comparing the two House of Lords sets of data against each other would help to reveal differences.
5. A p value of 0.0005 means that there is a 1 in 2000 danger of being wrong in claiming a relationship. In the social sciences a 1 in 20 (or $p < 0.5$) risk is usually considered to be acceptable. However as Scott (1999) notes, in a keywords analysis, the notion of risk is less important than the notion of selectivity. Using $p = 0.5$ value on the House of Lords data would give 492 keywords.
6. A lemma is a set of morphological variants, which is represented by the base form of verbs or singular form of nouns. For example *wash*, *washed*, *washing* and *washes* are forms of the lemma WASH.

7. In a survey of literature on the subject, Cass (1983: 108) notes that homosexual identity can be used to mean '... (1) defining oneself as gay, (2) a sense of self as gay, (3) image of self as homosexual, (4) the way a homosexual person is, and (5) consistent behavior in relation to homosexual-related activity'.
8. For example, Erikson's writings: *The Problem of Ego Identity* (1956), *Identity and The Life Cycle* (1959).

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Address correspondence to:

Paul Baker
Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language
Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YT
United Kingdom
p.baker@lancaster.ac.uk