Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of Letters

Words, Meanings and Discourses:

Religious Ideological Assumptions in Same-Sex

Marriage Parliamentary Debates

PhD Thesis Summary

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Context of the study

This scientific approach relies on the hypothesis that language is a fundamentally social phenomenon. (Yallop 2004, Halliday 1973, 1978, Teubert 2010 etc.) Moreover, of all human endeavours, language was and still continues to be the principal vehicle for conceptualizing, transmitting and gaining access to the world knowledge, positioning itself hereby at the very heart of our social lives. Yet, despite its social pervasiveness and its centrality in almost all areas of scientific research such as philosophy, logics, linguistics and even psychology language has still remained a notoriously difficult concept especially because of its complex and versatile character.

Reinforcing its social character, Foucault (1972) predicates that language is a means of bringing all sorts of social realities to the foreground, not only by naming them (and hereby by creating them) but also by assigning them meaning. More specifically, while being engaged in various linguistic interactions, language users create meanings and give thus rise to discourse production. Interestingly however, Foucault, who was well-known for being an atheist, practically assumes and reformulates the biblical parables from the Genesis where, as Edwards suggests, we find out that God himself has also "created things by naming them, and thus calling them into being; things were commanded into existence through speaking. *Opera dei sunt verba eius* – 'the works of God are his words'." (2009: 102, original emphasis) Such a perspective becomes thought-provoking because it subtly points to the remarkable influence of the Bible not only on our vocabulary but, most importantly, on our thinking paradigm. We may as well presume that the Bible has "entered [the] public consciousness" (Crystal 2010: 9) to such an extent that it has come to have profoundly moulded our moral and social identity. No wonder then that, over the history of humanity, the Bible and, implicitly, religion and all the values it stands for have often been conceived as the 'bedrock of identity'. (Safran 2008)

Since "reality is discursively structured" (Bachmann 2011: 80) and religion seems to be a major player with an influential voice in defining reality, we have found it challenging to set out to identify and further explore religious ideological assumptions in not just any discourses, but in ones constructed on an apparently quite socially controverted issue like the same-sex couples marriage. Ideology, according to van Dijk (1997), is the invisible thread that ties discourse to reality and whose main responsibility is to sustain and reproduce, more or less explicitly, the existing social power relations. Hence, starting from the premise that discourse production is subtly, yet fundamentally, influenced by more or less overtly disclosed social hierarchies (Fairclough 2001) and placing thus language in direct relation to power and dominance, we have presumed that, by exploring socially polarised identity constructs like religion and gay marriage could reveal, besides expected ideological clashes and social tensions, some interesting power position changes.

The year 2013 was a historical moment for the British society because "after years of campaigning, and having seen off some very tough opposition" (Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in: (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nick-cleggs-message-for-the-first-same-sex-weddings-in-the-uk) the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill became law. Despite the struggle of conservative religious groups and organizations against the equal acceptance of homosexuality, the UK Parliament decided to take the 2004 Civil Partnership Act (which grants legal recognition for same-sex couples) a step forward and promulgate a same-sex marriage bill demonstrating hereby the British society's "respect for all individuals regardless of their sexuality." (Women and Equalities Minister Maria Miller in: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/same-sex-marriage-becomes-law) The British society has thus aligned itself with a much larger global social trend that promotes equality and seeks to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Nevertheless, while homosexuality has gained over the last decades increasing public acceptance, religion and religious identity, long accepted as a matter of course and usually perceived as a long-standing tradition, seem to be somehow constrained to give way to the new, ever more visible trend. Furthermore, seen from a slightly different perspective, it is precisely such shifting power positions and their inherent ideological conflicts that give rise to most complex discursive strategies (Partington

2003) substantiating thus the empiric approach in this thesis as well. Assuming all these socio-contextual aspects, we may reason out that, by investigating various discourses produced around topics like homosexuality, in general, and same-sex marriage, in particular, and by identifying religious ideological assumptions that are drawn upon in such specific discourses, we might be able to reveal not only how language frames reality, but most importantly how it regulates people's identity. Seen from such a perspective, our study, besides its obvious linguistic interest, could also be regarded as a socio-linguistic undertaking.

Research objectives

The main objectives of this thesis have been to capture and propose a balanced perspective on the hierarchical structure of language and, most importantly, to identify and highlight some of the multifarious and subtle processes along which meaning is created. Assuming that "language is more than an individual possession or ability, that language 'exists' because of its life in social interaction, that meaning is shaped and negotiated in social interaction and that meaning must be studied with due recognition of its social setting" (Yallop 2004: 41-42), most of the aims of our thesis have been crystalized around this particular hypothesis. Another central hypothesis which comes to complement the one just mentioned is that meaning is an act of creation, an event rather than an immovable, inherent property of words. (Hanks 2000, Sinclair 2004) Hence, being a not only a social, but also a flexible event, meaning becomes thus prone to being negotiated by both linguistic (co-textual) and extra-linguistic (contextual) factors. Such approaches to meaning have generated theories like, for instance, delexicalisation and empty lexicon (Sinclair 2004) which, in their turn, by accounting for the phraseological tendency of language have practically led to the rethinking of the traditional lexis-grammar relation. After describing the relationship between words and meanings by placing special emphasis on both what and how words mean, we have focused and elaborated on the complex relation between context and meaning, highlighting that meaning is fundamentally and intrinsically governed and influenced by the context in which the linguistic event unfolds.

Having discussed in detail all the above mentioned phenomena has prepared the ground for the actual empirical research carried out in the penultimate chapter of this

thesis and which has been designed to investigate the parliamentary discourses constructed on the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill enactment in the UK, in 2013. The research has relied on a less typical analytical framework, one that combines corpus linguistics (CL) investigation tools with critical discourse analysis (CDA) methods and whose main purpose has been to identify and account for the religious ideological assumptions that underlie and are more or less overtly articulated in such discourses. By identifying religious recurrent lexical items and patterns of language with the help of semi-automatic CL tools and by placing them afterwards in the larger linguistic environment in which they were originally embedded has revealed various subtle social attitudes and behaviours which are able to point towards a fierce renegotiation of power position between the two identity markers implied, more precisely, between religion and homosexuality.

Scope and methodology

The theoretical stances and developments considered in this thesis have not only laid the foundation for the actual empirical study but, most importantly, they have all somehow pointed to and reinforced Baker's assumption, according to which "[n]o method of linguistic analysis is ever 'complete' in that it alone can provide the answer to every research question about language that is asked." (2010: 12)

Based on such a premise and assuming hereby implicitly that no language study can ever be exhaustive, we have sought to detect and highlight the different, yet intertwined and complementary facets of this multifarious and versatile phenomenon traditionally conceptualized as language. Special emphasis has been placed, on one hand, on the social character of language and, on the other hand, on the concept of meaning which, as suggested by Jackendoff (2002), is the 'holy grail' of all linguistic studies. It has been highlighted that as an essentially social tool, language does not merely display and communicate meaning, but it also establishes and maintains social relationships being thus prone to be altered and negotiated each time it is employed in a certain socio-cultural context.

In order to gain an as unbiased as possible perception on the complex phenomena that govern meaning production and interpretation, we have proposed for consideration and eventually compared and contrasted theoretical standpoints and

theories that emerge from various linguistic branches and schools of thought. Furthermore, along the same lines, we have adopted for our empirical study the same strategy and have consequently resorted to a less conventional methodological approach where corpus linguistics specific tools and procedures are employed to investigate various discourses. Albeit at a first blush corpus linguistic (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) might seem incompatible especially if we consider the fact that they are designed for different purposes and that they are indeed employed to explore language from quite divergent angles, recent studies have shown however that, by merging the two frames of reference, the researcher might not only explore larger amounts of language data but he/she might as well uncover language features that otherwise would remain unnoticed. (McEnery and Wilson 1996, Fairclough 2000, Partington 2003, Baker 2005, 2006, 2010, Salama 2011, Bachmann 2011 etc.) Nevertheless, one of the reasons for which researchers still tend to avoid such a cross-disciplinary approach is that while CL provides a mainly (but not exclusively though) quantitative description of language, CDA proposes a qualitative description. Yet, as Partington suggests (2003), one of the advantages of such a methodological synergy could be precisely the fact that by combining the two dimensions and by bringing thus together the qualitative and quantitative assessments, might add empirical weight to the researcher's introspection and make hereby the overall meaning interpretation more accurate and hence more reliable.

An outline of the study

The thesis is organised in seven chapters followed by a bibliography unit that also includes an Internet resources section. The main body of the thesis contains five chapters (2-6) which are founded on two complementary coordinates: the theoretical and, respectively, the empirical approach.

Chapter 1, **Introduction**, describes the general context of language studies with special emphasis on the intrinsic social character of language and its implicit impact on meaning construction and interpretation. Subsequently, after outlining the preliminary hypotheses the developments of this thesis are grounded on, this chapter discusses the main aims of this scientific approach proposing as well a thesis plan.

The following two chapters are designed to investigate what we believe to be two complementary facets of the same phenomenon conceptualized as the word-meaning relationship. Hence, while one facet accounts for what words mean, the other one describes how words mean. More specifically, in Chapter 2, **Words and Meanings. What Words Mean**, the word-meaning relationship is described on the basis of several contrasting theories. For instance, the context-free, literal meaning perspective where the independent, isolated word is regarded as the sole repository of meaning stands in marked contrast with the contextual meaning perspective which argues that meaning is not an inherent quality or an intrinsic feature of words, but, on the contrary, it emerges from words in combinations. Moreover, since meaning cannot be found in isolated words, it can then most faithfully be described as an event rather than an entity. (Hanks 2000, Sinclair 2004) The impact of such theories has been remarkable as they have given rise to other ground-breaking theories like *delexicalisation, shared meaning* and *empty lexicon* which have in their turn inspired almost all modern theories of meaning.

The hypotheses discussed in Chapter 3, **Words and Meanings. How Words Mean**, stem from the theories of *delexicalisation* and *empty lexicon* elaborated on in the previous chapter. The idea promoted by the two theories according to which in naturally occurring linguistic encounters words enter into meaningful relations with other words around them offers fertile ground for understanding the complex processes along which structural relations and sense associations are performed within the vocabulary of a language. Hence, this chapter tackles various sense relations performed on both the paradigmatic level (synonymy, polysemy, monosemy, anotnymy) and the syntagmatic level (collocations, colligations). Nevertheless, special emphasis is placed on the syntagmatic sense relations and on some of the innovative theoretical standpoints they have produced. Among these we would only like to mention *the model of extended units of meaning* (Sincalir 1996b/ 2004), *the lexical priming theory* (Hoey 2005), *the idiom principle* (Sincair 1991) and *the collocational resonance* (Williams 2008). One common feature that all these theories share is the idea that language has a natural phraseological tendency, a tendency that cannot be accounted for by either intuitive or logical reasoning.

Chapter 4, **Context and Meaning**, readdresses and enlarges on various theoretical treatments of context already touched upon in the previous chapters. It sets out from the premise that context functions as a fertilizer for the word and then offers a detailed description of both the early theories of context and some of the more current approaches. Contrasting the two perspectives provides evidence for the fact that, almost without exception, all modern theories of context find their essence in the ground-breaking theory of *context of situation* first put forward by scholars like Malinowski (1923), Firth (1957) and Halliday (1978). Another remarkable finding highlighted in this chapter is that meaning assessment is closely linked not only to cultural values but also to some sort of knowledge, most commonly labelled as *prior knowledge, shared knowledge, background knowledge, encyclopaedic knowledge, world knowledge, domain knowledge* or *common-sense knowledge*. All these aspects, as inherent features of context, play a significant and decisive role in both meaning production and investigation.

Since the literature review put forward for consideration in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 has highlighted the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of meaning assessment, we have come to presume that only a cross-disciplinary approach to language could provide the premises for a more reliable and hence less biased linguistic interpretation. Hence, Chapter 5, **Methodology and Analytical Framework**, introduces and subsequently discusses both the advantages and the disadvantages of a methodological synergy between two apparently incongruous frames of references like corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). After briefly outlining the types of corpora, this chapter provides a detailed account for the methodologies and procedures that are most commonly employed in corpus-assisted analyses. As the main research purpose of the empirical study carried out in the upcoming chapter is to unpack subtle ideological assumptions drawn upon in various discourses, special attention has been directed towards both the discourse-ideology relation and the corpus processes that enable the researcher to objectively detect and uncover such ideologies.

Chapter 6, **Empirical Study of Same-Sex Marriage Related Discourses in the UK Parliamentary Debates**, finds its theoretical support in the methodological synergy accounted for in the previous chapter. The corpus investigated has been compiled from the 26 debates held within the British Parliament, in 2013, when the

Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill was introduced and eventually enacted. It comprises 723,583 words of running text, a size that makes this corpus comparable with the Bible, for instance, which contains 795,180 words of running text. Moreover, in order to refine and enhance the outcomes of the quantitative investigations performed on the corpus we have purposefully compiled, we have compared our findings with the ones produced within reference corpora like the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Bible.

The actual empirical research has implied a hierarchical three-phase process. The first phase, the computer-assisted frequency analysis, has allowed us to pinpoint the most recurrent lexical items from the Same-Sex Marriage Corpus (SSMC). One of the most interesting results yielded along this first phase has been that religious lexical items like 'church', 'religious' and 'faith' have produced higher than expected frequency numbers, all of them being among the first ten most frequent words employed in the entire corpus. This may indicate that, within the British society, religion is an inherent characteristic of marriage. The second phase, the collocation analysis, has suggested that the lexical associations unfolded by some of the religious lexical items identified during the first phase tend to foster some mutual recurrent ideological assumptions. Hence, it has been noted that almost all investigated religious lexical items most often occur with words like 'institution', 'organisation', 'principle', 'tradition' and 'protection'. Interestingly, all these collocates seem to be indicative of the authoritative and decisive power position of religion in issues related to gay marriage. Yet, as the third phase (the extended concordance analysis) of the research reveals, the judgements made during the collocational analysis have proven to be accurate with one single exception. Apparently, 'protection' does not seem to indicate after all the authoritative position of either the Church or its representatives that were initially believed to grant protection to the less favoured, but, on the contrary, the context analysis has clearly unmasked the fact that it is actually the religious institutions, values and representatives the ones that need to be protected against the new, ever more visible, present and vocal identity marker recognized as homosexuality. Given all these aspects, it might be inferred that what has been conceived as explicit protection for religion and religious values could be actually intended as implicit protection for same-sex couples and sexual diversity. Moreover, such more or less explicitly articulated tensions might eventually reveal a fierce renegotiation of social power position.

Since each chapter provided detailed summaries and conclusions, Chapter 7, **Conclusions**, which is also the last chapter of the thesis, is designed to review the progress of the entire scientific approach by reiterating and discussing the relevance of the main hypotheses elaborated and also by highlighting the most relevant findings of the empirical study performed in the previous chapter. A list of the complete **Bibliography** (including the **Internet resources**) is also included at the end of the thesis and its main purpose is to provide both documentary and ideological support for the entire scientific approach.

Importance and contribution of the study

We believe that this study may find its relevance in both its theoretical and empirical approaches. As far as the theoretical approach is concerned, the thesis is structured in such a manner as to provide an objective, detailed and yet coherent overview on how language naturally operates, with special emphasis on meaning creation and interpretation. Hence, in order to impartially identify some of the most complex and sometimes elusive processes along which meaning is created, theories emerging from divergent schools of thought have not only been put forward for consideration, but they have also been compared and contrasted.

The importance of the empirical study could be described as two-folded. On one hand, the research relies on a less conventional methodological synergy, an approach that nevertheless eventually does prove its linguistic prolificacy. More precisely, besides facilitating the researcher's access to large amounts of language data, it also helps prevent the subjective 'cherry-picking' of the linguistic data meant exclusively to serve the "researcher's own political agenda" (Mautner 2009: 35) guiding him/her thus towards linguistic facts that otherwise would probably remain undetected and hence unexplored.

On the other hand, the topic of the empirical study seems to be itself a novelty in the linguistic research landscape. Most studies that approach polarised identity constructs like religion and homosexuality are strictly sociological studies. (Merin 2002, Myers 2005, Walls & co. 2013) Yet, although there are several relevant linguistic studies that approach exclusively the topic of homosexuality, their main scholastic purpose is to account for the ways in which homosexual identity, as compared to

heterosexual identity, is discursively structured. (Sunderland 2004, Baker 2005, Bachmann 2011) Seen from such a perspective, the present study may seem indeed to open the path towards the (socio-) linguistic investigation of discourses constructed around a new and ever more socially prominent oppositional pairing like religion and homosexuality.

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