

NAMING PRACTICES AND NEGOTIATION OF MEANING: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF SPANISH AND ENGLISH NEWSPAPER DISCOURSE

JOSÉ SANTAEMILIA RUIZ
SERGIO MARUENDA BATALLER
Universitat de València

ABSTRACT

The present study is part of the work of the group GENTEXT (Género y (des)igualdad sexual en las sociedades española y británica contemporáneas: Documentación y análisis discursivo de textos socio-ideológicos) under a Research Project financed by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación [FFI2008-04534/FILO]. Over the last few years, several laws in Western European countries have given homosexual couples different degrees of legal recognition. In the UK, for example, the Civil Partnership Act (2004) recognised same-sex 'civil unions', while in Spain the 2005 amendment of the Civil Code granted full marriage rights to gay couples.

*In this paper we combine critical discourse analysis and lexical pragmatics to analyse key semantic sets regarding naming practices for 'people' (e.g. gay couples, homosexual couples, partner, etc) and 'relationships' (e.g. matrimonio homosexual, matrimonio gay, pareja de hecho, homosexual couples, civil partnership, same-sex partnerships, etc) drawn from a comparable (ad hoc) corpus of news articles of two Spanish (*El País, El Mundo*) and two British newspapers (*The Guardian, The Times*), each pair showing progressive vs conservative ideological stances.*

Keywords: naming practices – sexual (in)equality – gay marriage – discursive conflict – meaning negotiation.

1. INTRODUCTION: LEGAL MEASURES TOWARDS SEXUAL EQUALITY

In the Western countries, a number of legal measures have been adopted in order to achieve full equality between men and women, the different family models and the different sexual options. In particular, we are witnessing within the last few years a battery of legal measures granting same-sex couples different degrees of recognition and visibility, as well as the same rights as the rest of couples. In Spain and the United Kingdom, two key legal measures have been adopted: the *Civil Partnership Act* was passed on 18 November 2004, while the Bill no. 121/000018 (*Proyecto de Ley por la que se modifica el Código Civil en materia de derecho a contraer matrimonio*) was passed on 30 June 2005, and amended the Civil Code to grant full marriage rights to gay couples.

The aim of our research is to document and analyze the concepts, the discursive processes, the ideological tensions, the semantic negotiation as a consequence of the recent legal measures. And we believe that the best site to analyze such phenomena is what we have called socio-ideological texts, i.e. those texts –such as newspaper articles, religious or institutional texts– which, due to their prescriptive or persuasive nature, help to shape the citizens' discourses, ideological attitudes and rhetorical frameworks in today's democratic societies.

2. NEWSPAPER DISCOURSE: OUR CORPUS

We have selected all the news articles where the term 'homosexual' is present; the data collected is restricted to the month where the aforementioned laws were passed –i.e. 1-30/11/2004 and 15/06-15/07/2005, respectively. We have collected our corpus from two Spanish (*El País*, *El Mundo*) and two British newspapers (*The Guardian*, *The Times*), each pair showing similar progressive vs conservative ideological stances.

Ours is an *ad hoc* corpus, which is “created with a specific use at a concrete moment: collecting in the smallest space the largest possible amount of certain documents” (Valero 2006: 452), and whose

main asset is that it is homogeneous and highly specialized. The total number of words is 354,048 and is made up of four sub-corpora, as follows:

<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>	<i>El Pais</i>	<i>El Mundo</i>
55,228	32,741	185,527	80,552

Table 1. Number of words per each of the four sub-corpora (news articles containing the term ‘homosexual’)

We start from the assumption that, when a legal measure is adopted, a major part of the social debate around it is transferred to the media. In the days prior to, or subsequent to, the passing of this important piece of gender-related legislation, a sort of *discursive frenzy* can be clearly detected. Table 2 illustrates this phenomenon:

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Ago	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
91	52	53	150	123	240	175	50	96	80	59	62

Table 2. Number of news articles containing the term ‘homosexual’ in the Spanish daily *El Pais* in the year 2005 (figures for each month)

It would not be redundant to remember that legal norms might be amongst the most transcendental social texts in today’s world, as they shape –to a large extent– the discursive strategies of a democratic community. Each newspaper generates its own idiom, creates a version of the language of the segment of population to whom it is addressed and for whom creates a suitable public rhetoric. In a way, “[n]ewspaper and reader negotiate the significance of the text around the stipulations of the appropriate discourse” (Fowler 1991: 44). Newspapers generate specific ideologies and are, in turn, fuelled by these very ideologies they help to construct. Due to their importance in shaping and structuring public opinion, the analysis of newspaper articles dealing with the naming practices related to same-sex marriages is overtly political.

Homosexuals, in particular, are heavily discussed in newspapers, and the way they are discussed or portrayed is not innocent –this is part of an ongoing debate on how to constitute them in/through discourse, what place to give them in public, legal or institutional

discourses. All representations of events –whether mediated or not– are *polysemic* –that is unstable and ambiguous in meaning. We are “unwittingly trapped in a world of biased perceptions and ‘stories’” (Riggings 1997), all of which both exceed and shortchange reality.

3. SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: A BATTLE OF NAMING PRACTICES

Legislative measures on same-sex couples in Spain and the UK have generated a wealth of naming practices around the different actors and practices involved. ‘Gay marriage’, ‘civil partnership’, or ‘same-sex marriage’, are the result of the struggle of the whole society offering opinions: ordinary people, lawyers, judges, politicians, etc. For some, it is irrelevant whether same-sex people enter a marriage or a partnership –this is ‘just semantics’, as McConnell-Ginet (2006: 228) puts it. For others, however, “it matters considerably whether the word marriage shall be construed as including or excluding same-sex unions” (*ibidem*).

Naming is far from innocent, and is usually allied to power, as it can confer strengths and limitations and, more importantly, an (im)mutable identity. Names, once adopted, are difficult to eradicate. Oppositions like *matrimonio homosexual* vs *civil partnership* –which have been imposed after severe negotiation in the legal, political or economic fields– tend to become (more or less) *fixed* identities. Many crucial (ideological) battles in our world are fought in the arena of semantics, through language labels that are used by the press in order to facilitate and maintain discrimination against minority social or sexual groups. These are some of the reasons why we observe the “dense presence in newspaper discourse of category labels” (Fowler 1991: 93).

4. NAMING PRACTICES IN OUR DATA: SAME-SEX PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Initial data is contrasted according to such variables as number of articles, focus (i.e. if the topic is addressed directly or the terms are marginally used), and frequency of the semantic sets under analysis.

	number of articles	topic addressed directly	%
<i>El País</i>	313	216	69
<i>El Mundo</i>	94	60	63.8
<i>The Guardian</i>	48	4	8.3
<i>The Times</i>	32	2	6.2

Table 3. Percentage of articles containing naming practices associated with the word *homosexual* and addressing the topic directly.

The results drawn from the analysis of the four sub-corpora point towards some possible directions for further research:

- (1) The *Civil Partnership Act* did not give rise to the same social and discursive ardour in the British dailies.
- (2) An overwhelming profusion of articles addressing the topic in the progressive *El País* (216 vs 60).
- (3) However, there is no significant difference in the *percentage* of articles directly addressing the topic (69% vs 63.8%).

A close look at the articles evinces that these disparate reactions to the new legislation could be conceptualised in terms of at least two discourses, through which the reality they purport to reflect is construed: (1) the provision of marriage rights to homosexual couples; and (2) the depiction of the new law as a fierce attack on the institution of marriage and on traditional family rights. Thus, while the progressive *El País* abounds in op-eds whose writers take up a stand against right-wing and Church leaders opposing the granting of civil rights to homosexuals, the conservative *El Mundo* sparsely observes the debate generated among social actors and communities of practice. The following instances illustrate both forms of discourse:

- (1) ***El Mundo* 18/06/2005**
El arzobispo de Madrid, cardenal Antonio María Rouco Varela expresó en el último Foro de *El Mundo* su posición ante el matrimonio homosexual: "Lo que está ocurriendo es de muchísima trascendencia y gravedad. La familia queda absolutamente desprotegida con la modificación legal que se quiere hacer".
- (2) ***El País* 17/06/2005** Soledad Gallego-Díaz
La manifestación que se celebrará mañana en Madrid ha sido convocada por diversos grupos conservadores y por el Partido Popular "en defensa de la familia",

pero, sin duda, se trata de una confusión, porque lo que los convocantes defienden es, simplemente, su idea de matrimonio.

The terminological amendments in Bill no. 121/000018 show no preference for any *new* formula or designation for ‘people’ or ‘relationships’, albeit *same-sex marriage* seems to be implied. An initial approach to the corpora reveals nevertheless that the battle for the legitimation of specific naming practices is fought in the social and political arena, where the contenders take up the arms of *negotiation of meaning*.

In this ideological struggle, the actors involved in the social practices (namely, journalists, newsmakers and readers) have fairly precise expectations about the sociocultural setting, which clearly defines social roles, and gives specific values to power, social distance, solidarity, etc., which have to be reconciled with their conflicting goals (i.e. struggling to establish the preeminence of their antagonistic discourses). In terms of pragmatics, actors recursively and strategically negotiate the meaning of linguistically-encoded concepts, either countering or contending with instances of language use. In our sub-corpora, the discussion turns around the concepts encoded by *matrimonio* and *familia*:

(3) *El País* 15/06/2005 E de B.

El arzobispo de Granada, Javier Martínez, anunció ayer que asistirá en Madrid a la manifestación contra la ley que permitirá los matrimonios homosexuales. (...) El proyecto de ley que regula el matrimonio entre personas del mismo sexo "discrimina a **los matrimonios verdaderos**" y "ofende a la inteligencia".

(4) *El País* 19/06/2005 Martina Delacroix/Andrea Rizzi

Beatriz Gimeno, presidenta de la Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays y Transexuales (FELGT) invita a la ciudadanía a luchar "por la convivencia de **modelos de familia plurales**" a todos los que creen en una sociedad libre e igualitaria.

In the fight for power through discourse, the ‘counter-discourse’ of the amendment legitimates a new cultural representation of marriage aimed to depose the dominant one, sanctioned by tradition. In lexical pragmatics terms (Wilson & Carston 2007), the result is an *ad hoc* concept MATRIMONIO* where one of its defining features (the union of a man and a woman) is dropped and *same-sex* is given a

constitutive role. Conservative forces show resistance, and their contributions to the debate intend to reinforce the established history of ideas. In terms of the number of occurrences of the key naming practices for both same-sex ‘people’ and ‘relationships’, no significant divergence between progressive and conservative newspapers can be detected:

	<i>El País</i> 185,527 w.	<i>El Mundo</i> 80,552 w.
Pareja* homosexual*	60	21
Pareja* (de personas) del mismo sexo	29	15
matrimonio* homosexual*	210	71
matrimonio* gay*	72	15

Table 4. Number of occurrences of the main naming practices associated with same-sex ‘people’ in the Spanish dailies *El País* and *El Mundo*.

	<i>The Guardian</i> 55,228 w.	<i>The Times</i> 32,741 w.
Homosexual* couple(s)	2	2
civil partnership	16	2
gay marriage*	19	3

Table 5. Number of occurrences of the main naming practices associated with same-sex ‘people’ in the English dailies *The Guardian* and *The Times*.

Even though newsmakers are given an authoritative voice in the media, that voice is always sifted through apparent neutrality. The role of newsmakers is one of providing fodder for the newspapers’ constructions of news stories. However, writers retain the power to *craft* the wording. Two possible implications of this are: (1) readers are told not only that someone has said something but how they are expected to respond; and (2) writers may distance themselves from the claims made by others through the use of distance markers, specific lexical choices, quotation marks, and phrases such as “according to”, “alleged” and “said” to *mitigate* and *disguise* statements not appreciated by an audience, and therefore to evade responsibility. Further research on forms of attribution will certainly provide a more fine-grained picture of power relationships in the contending discourses through media representation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have begun to explore a wide variety of discursive practices generated by recent gender-equality legislation. New legal measures continue to be adopted internationally to favour social or sexual minorities, such as immigrants, homosexuals or battered women. Though social support for same-sex marriage seems universal in Western societies, we can still find a multiplicity of fierce *counter-discourses*, duly amplified by the Church and the ultra-conservative media, whose only objective seems to be to oppose any measure of recognition of the rights of minorities. Discursive struggle always accompanies these legal measures, which we wish to study through media representation.

We are building an *ad hoc* corpus (GENTEXT-N), composed of all newspaper articles, from two progressive (*El Pais* and *The Guardian*) and two conservative (*El Mundo* and *The Times*) dailies. Our corpus currently contains 1,500,000 words, and includes all key gender-related terms (such as ‘homosexual’, ‘abortion’ or ‘domestic violence’) from 2005 to 2009. These are three of the most widely used, defended, resisted, subject to constant redefinition, etc., terms in newspapers today. They are part of our contemporary idiom, privileged objects of public and private negotiation. Newspapers – together with legislation and institutional publication– are possibly “the sites in which new gender and sexual identities are redefined. This is an arena for the enactment of a fierce battle between reactionary and progressive positions on the recognition of diversity” (Santaemilia & Bou 2008: xxiii). Ours is an ambitious corpus, which – we believe– will offer significant linguistic, ideological and discursive insights into today’s new family types, as well as into new gender and sexual configurations.

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