

## Unraveling the Confederate Flag: Discourse Frameworks as Ideological Constraints<sup>1</sup>

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*In this paper I present evidence that Confederate flag discourse is characterized by a framework of assumptions that marginalizes African-American experience and takes as given “white Southern” claims on identity. Lexical items such as “Confederate” and “history” co-occur far more frequently than parallel associations representing African-American experience. Drawing on Bourdieu, I claim these patterns constitute a framework of norms that shapes and is shaped by participants’ linguistic choices. The language of the debate not only reflects how people view their social organization but also reaffirms the social world in place, constraining people from readily thinking of it in other terms.*

I came to this research in the spring of 2000, during the height of the Confederate flag debate in South Carolina, when, looking for a term paper topic, I noticed that pro-flag arguments involved talk about heritage and other concepts that define cultural groups. I wanted to see how those concepts were being used, and to what effect, suspecting that

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if I abstracted away from the argument of whether or not the flag should fly I would find some shared meaning in the way participants used language in the debate. The resulting study explores how language influences the way people construe the social state of affairs. Several types of language patterns suggest that debate participants form their talk within a pliable network of assumptions that they themselves are constantly weaving and reworking. The analyses presented in this paper represent part of my developing Master’s Thesis in linguistics.

### 1. Background and Introduction

The Confederate flag was raised above the South Carolina State House in 1962 during a national observance of the Civil War centennial. While flag advocates insist that the flag was raised in a celebratory spirit, many critics have argued that it represented an act of defiance in the face of increasing (federally-mandated) Civil Rights reforms such as integration. Intermittent protests of the flag during its 38-year presence on the dome eventually gave way to two prolonged debates over whether the flag should remain on the dome, one in 1994 and another, almost three-fold in intensity, in 1999-2000. The greater intensity of the more recent debate, on which this analysis will focus, was illustrated by the some 50,000 people, largely African-American, who filled the streets of downtown Columbia to protest the flag during the “King Day at the Dome” Rally on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, January 17, 2000. (After lengthy debate, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was officially recognized for the first time on May 1, 2000, when, along with Confederate Memorial Day, it was declared a paid State holiday). Some weeks later Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston, along with other flag protesters, walked the full distance from Charleston to the State House in Columbia: the “Get in Step” march. The debate also drew flag advocates to the State House on numerous occasions. The 1999-2000 debate culminated in the removal of the Confederate Naval Jack from the State House dome and chambers in July 2000, through a formal, televised ceremony in which two Citadel cadets—one white and one black—lowered and folded the flag for transport to “a place of honor.” Following this, Civil War enactors raised a square version of the flag, the Battle Flag of Northern Virginia, on a flag pole at the Confederate Soldiers monument in front of the State House, where it is lit up at night. The spattering of protests over the installment of the “new” flag quietly subsided within weeks, despite the NAACP’s pronouncement that the economic boycott would continue.

Two main research questions form the basis for this study. My narrow focus for analysis is: What does Confederate flag discourse reveal about the social state of affairs in place for this debate? More broadly, what is the role of language in maintaining or transforming social realities? I hope to show, through the lenses of *performative* theories of language (Ahearn, 2001) and practice-theoretical approaches to culture (Bourdieu, 1991; Ortner, 1997), that human agency creates and re-creates the constraints that constitute social realities, and that agency is simultaneously shaped by these worlds, in a recursive dynamic. I will also address what might facilitate social change and suggest how it might occur. I aim to show the discourse framework evidenced in the Confederate flag debate as a “microprocess” for ideology as a dynamic phenomenon, the working “givens” by which we interpret—and interact in—the world. Thus, this discussion of ideology does not concern judgments about speakers’ varieties, nor does it characterize a fixed or abstract set of beliefs, to be contrasted with “reality.” Rather, it looks at language and social life as *co-emergent*, so that, as one organic process, language not only reflects social reality but also constrains the possible ways it can be construed. This analysis works towards an understanding of ideology as a process by which the push and pull of norms and innovation result in the same or different norms. Key to this idea is the argument that ideology is located both above and below the level of awareness, and that the most tacit network of presuppositions has the greatest influence in how its adherents interpret the world and interact with one another. Language patterns in the Confederate flag debate evidence just such an implicit framework of assumptions.

## 2. Constructing Discourse, Meaning, Society

Several linguistic and social theories—from the fields of linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, sociology, critical theory, and history—form the basis for this study. These theories, from different traditions both within and across disciplines, complement each other and together inform the analysis in a richer way. From history (and interdisciplinary social science) I incorporate Hobsbawm’s (1983) and Anderson’s (1983) ideas about the collaborative creation of tradition and community. Bakhtin’s (1991) understanding of the indeterminacy of meaning, as well as Austin (1961) and the performative school, col-lusional theorists McDermott and Tylbor (1995) and various linguistic anthropologists (Duranti, 1997; Cohn, 1987; Harding, 1987; Ahearn,

2001; Ortner, 1997), contribute to my fundamental assumptions about language as action. Central to this analysis is a practice theoretical approach to culture. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991a, 1991b) conception of symbolic power and *doxa* (as “undiscussed” social norms) figure prominently, as do numerous anthropologists who see cultural formation as emergent and dialogic. In particular, recent work on agency inspires provoking questions about how social reality is created, and the role language plays in this (Ahearn, 2001).

## 3. Methodology

In the course of exploring my hypotheses I make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, recognizing that these are complementary tools that together can reveal a greater range of systematic patterns than can either one alone. The methodology for this analysis addresses several specific goals. I will look for evidence of a discourse framework, first by determining to what extent words indexing cultural experience, such as *heritage* and *ancestry*, co-occur with words representing particular racial/ethnic identities. I will also determine whether participants’ ethnic backgrounds and stances on the flag are a factor in the kinds of associations they make. Finally, I will look at the extent to which participants observe or question an apparent network of assumptions in the debate.

One part of this analysis involves excerpts from a number of sources: an hour-long forum on the flag issue on South Carolina Educational Television in November 1999; speeches delivered on April 12, 2000 before the Senate’s roll call vote on the bill to move the Confederate battle flag to the soldier’s monument in front of the State House; and later House debate on the flag resolution. In addition I will refer to editorials, columns and letters on the Confederate flag debate collected from *The State* newspaper (August 1999-July 2000). (I have also taken into account rally signs and banners, cartoons, as well as some informal, short interviews and spontaneous conversations on the flag debate, which will not be discussed here.)

Another part of the analysis involves counting co-occurrences of certain lexical items in all of the 663 opinion pieces in *The State* newspaper. While considering other terms and concepts that group together with “history” and “heritage” at the start of this study, I wondered if these terms might occur more frequently with words representing one group in

the debate rather than another. I came up with two groups of words, or, semantic domains: on the one hand *Confederate*, *South*, *white*, versus *slave*, *black*, and *African-American*, representing ethnic identities—which divide into their own respective semantic domains—and on the other hand *heritage*, *history*, *ancestry*, and *culture*, representing “cultural experience,” as seen in Table 1 (In future analysis I will also include *honor*, *struggle*, and *sacrifice* in the semantic domain “experience”). Although *South* is not inherently associated with *white* Southerners, I group it thus, based on the way it is generally used in the context of the discourse; this bears further analysis, possibly through counts of matches between *South* and other words within the domain “identity.”

#### (1) Semantic Domains: Identity and Experience

A. Identity	B. Experience
Africa(n/s/-American)	Hist(ory/orical)
Black(s)	Heritage
Slave(s/ery)	Ancest(ry/ors)
Confed(erate/eracy)	Cultur(e/al)
South(ern/erner/s)	Sacrific(e/ial)
White(s)	Struggle(s)
	Honor(able/s)

The concept of semantic domains is widely accepted in linguistic anthropology. Meaning can come out of the intersection of semantic domains, as well as what I call “semantic fields,” the elements that make up a domain. Though within linguistic anthropology grammatical structure has been considered potentially the most fundamental influence of language on how groups’ construe their relations in the world, lexical correlations and other linguistic patterns also reflect and circumscribe participants’ social worlds, as in the framework of Confederate flag debate. Disparities in the contexts in which correspondences between words arise, and the frequency with which they are used, can create entailments. When words are weighted toward some meanings/associations more than others, speakers will use them with certain presuppositions.

Using a computer program called NEAR<sup>2</sup>, I counted all possible

<sup>2</sup> NEAR is a free software program written in Python by Jason F. McBrayer for this study.

matches between terms across the two semantic domains above, within 15 words of one another. I compared the correspondences for each of the elements<sup>3</sup> of the semantic domain “cultural experience” with each of those representing African-American and white Southern perspectives.<sup>4</sup> I look at the number of matches for each pair, but more importantly, I look at the percentage of total matches with experience words associated with the semantic domain African-American identity versus the domain Anglo-American identity.

#### 4. Evidence of a Discourse Framework

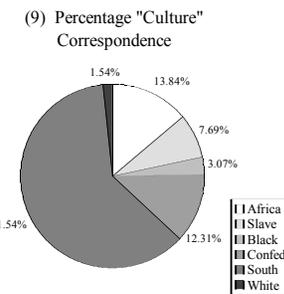
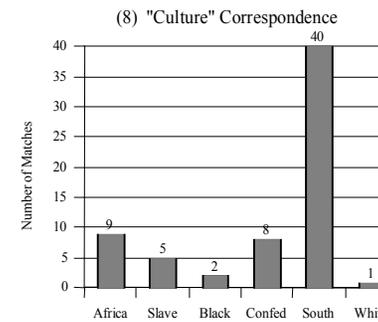
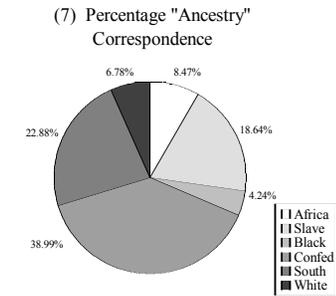
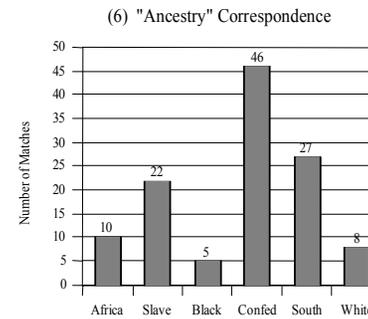
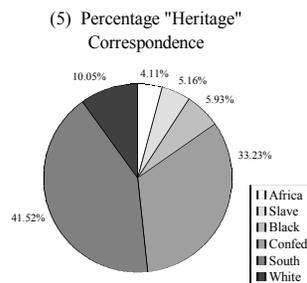
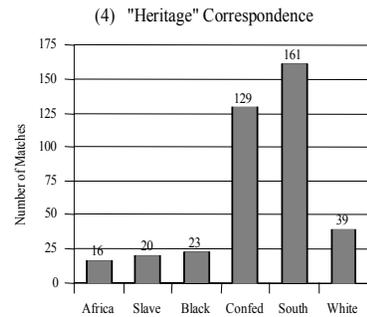
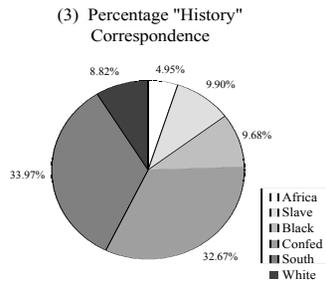
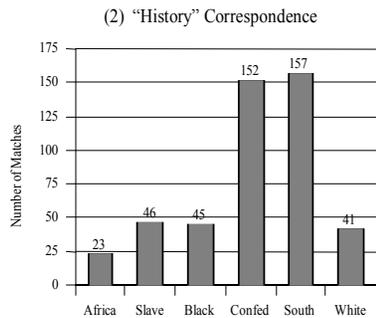
Findings for the quantitative part of the analysis show that *South* and *Confed* correlate with cultural experience words more often than do any other identity terms. This is illustrated in (2)-(9) below, where the number of matches between all the identity terms for each experience word are represented in a bar graph (even numbered figures); percentages for these matches are shown in a pie chart (odd numbers). The number of tokens for matches with each “experience” word ranges from 65 to 464, with *culture* at the low end, *ancestry* in a middle range at about 118 tokens, and, finally, *heritage* and *history* with 388 and 464 tokens, respectively. Not only do *South* and *Confed* show a higher number of matches for each experience term, but, together as a group, white identity terms make up a notably higher percentage of total occurrences for each experience word than do the terms representing black identity. It could be said that the group represented by these predominant “white Southern” identity terms has more of a claim on these elements of experience. The results for matches between identity terms with *heritage* and *history* evidence the greatest disparity of claims on elements of “cultural experience”; however, the same pattern obtains throughout. As a semantic domain, “white Southern” (all of its terms together) claims between 70%-85% of each cultural experience term. The dominance of these terms creates entailments for each of the cultural experience words whenever they are

<sup>3</sup> Searches include all derivations of a stem, i.e., “Confed” will account for “Confederate(s),” “Confederacy”; “South” will account for “Southern,” “Southerner(s),” etc.

<sup>4</sup> To account for the fact that meaning is rarely primarily referential, in all of the searches I also noted the context for occurrences of each token within six lines of text, generated by NEAR. Though this aspect of the analysis will not be presented here, I have found that it likewise provides evidence of a discourse framework that marginalizes African-American experience.

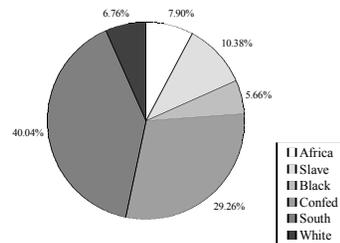
used alone, illustrating how meaning is shaped in social context (Sapir, 1949; Austin, 1961).

Another important finding (not represented graphically) is that out of a sample set of data (30% of the corpus), only 17% of participants wanted to keep the flag up; assuming this group is representative, it is clear that stance does not bear on the type of associations people make, suggesting that participants share certain presuppositions about who gets to make claims about their experience as a cultural group. In McDermott and Tylbor's terms (1995), participants *collude* around the linguistic and social meanings that will be in place in a discourse, tacitly agreeing on the norms for interaction. According to Bourdieu, participants who accept a certain state of affairs against their best interests *misrecognize* the *symbolic power* of the norms, not realizing the social harm they cause. This keeps the social order in the realm of *doxa*; silence on issues of power helps perpetuate a given social reality.



These results suggest that the flag debate is characterized by a framework of assumptions that privileges white experience in the discourse at the expense of African-American experience. Whether they say they want to keep the flag up or take it down, participants appear to share presuppositions about who gets to make claims about their experience as a cultural group. The total percentage of white Southern vs. African-American associations on the domain "experience" as a whole are summed up in Figure 10 below, where the three African-American terms together (in block color shades of gray) "claim" less than a quarter of the pie. In contrast, the Southern white terms together (represented by hatching) are associated with over 75% of the semantic domain.

(10) Percentage "Experience" Correspondence



All these findings typify Bakhtin's (1981) observation that words are never neutral but instead carry traces of their social life. Rather than merely reflecting a certain state of affairs, language brings into being a complex network of assumptions mediated by histories of social relations, beliefs, and customs. It not only expresses interpretations of the world but frames how interpretation may proceed.

### 5. Constraints on Meaning, Constraints on Social Reality

Having established that there is a framework in place, it is instructive to consider how participants, particularly African-Americans, align themselves to this framework. While some African-Americans do challenge the framework, others appear to observe its norms.

#### (11) SCETV Forum

*Ivan:* Um, yes. I'm a former NAACP president, and number one, the NAACP, all they want is the flag down from the dome. They don't want to destroy heritage and all of that. And number two, blacks, as an African-American, African-Americans do not care where the flag is as long as it's not on top of the dome. All this talk about destroying heritage is incorrect.

In the above excerpt Ivan seems to assume heritage in terms of Confederate/Southern white heritage, without even having to specify what kind of heritage he is talking about. The meaning of the term is contextually, that is, socially, situated, and the framework represents this situatedness. A common pro-flag argument is that bringing down the flag will dishonor Confederate heritage, and Ivan is responding to

that argument. Cases like this one show that the discourse framework, as a system of norms to be observed, constrains the very terms that participants can use in the debate. The fact that some African-Americans observe the framework indicates that people may agree to and support certain "givens" of the discourse even when this works against them, causing them to *misrecognize* the framework (Bourdieu, 1991a).

In the following excerpt Rep. Bessie Moody-Lawrence calls into question this framework that assumes whites have a monopoly on *heritage*, as well as Southern identity:

#### (12) House Debate on Amendments to Flag Resolution Bill:

Rep. Becky Meecham-Richardson (Anglo-American)

Rep. Bessie Moody-Lawrence (African-American)

M-L: You mentioned several times that, um, the flag represents your heritage? And I'd like for you to please define that for me. What is your heritage? That's what I'm concerned—I'd like to know what is your heritage?

M-R: What is my heritage. I was born and raised in Chester, South Carolina. Uh, by Southern family. All of my family, I think has—my descendants were from South Carolina. I was brought up with—I mean I don't know how I explain my Southern heritage. It's me. It's part of me. It's what I'm, what I'm about, it's what's my family is about, what I'm proud of...

M-L: I'd like you to just be specific about at least one of those things; your Southern ways or your, uh, Southern upbringing. I was born in the South too, Ms. Meecham, in Chester South [Carolina,

M-R: [I know—

M-L: right around the corner from where you were born.

M-R: I know and you knew my [Daddy.

M-L: [And I've lived here in the South all my life Ms. Richardson, did you know that?

M-R: Yes, and you and I get along don't we?

M-L: [Yes—

M-R: [You came to my wedding, didn't you.

M-L: Yes, that has nothing to do with *this*, though, Ms. Richardson. (Laughter) I like you personally. But Ms., uh,

Richardson, what I'm trying to say is I was born in the South, in South Carolina, Chester, and I wouldn't live any other place, Ms. Richardson.

M-R: I [wouldn't either

M-L: [BUT, Ms. Richardson, there are some [things that have have passed that I can't agree with. [interruption by Speaker of the House

Moody-Lawrence's challenge to Meechan-Richardson's claims corroborates other evidence for a discourse framework defined in terms of white experience. To a certain extent all participants operate within this framework just by participating in the debate. If it were not the norm, Moody-Lawrence would not have occasion to challenge it. But this excerpt also illustrates a kind of resistance to the framework that, though still tied to the framework, may be the least constrained by it. Whereas, in (11), Ivan has called in to the show to protest how the debate is being cast, his alignment to the framework seems less oppositional—more incorporated into the framework itself. Through collusion Ivan and other participants tacitly reaffirm the “givens” in place for the debate, observing the discourse framework (McDermott and Tylbor, 1995). Rep. Moody-Lawrence likewise co-constructs the framework, but questions the normative network and redirects its formation.

Whatever contextual factors lead some African-Americans to observe the framework, the fact remains that by doing so, along with other participants in the debate, they are adhering to a system of norms that undermines African-American claims on cultural experience. This keeps the framework below the surface, in Bourdieu's realm of *doxa*. As long as it is not fully articulated as a framework of “givens,” that is, identified as a construct, its normalcy is preserved. An important point is that all the participants in the above examples are constrained by the framework, but they are not subject to rigid limitations. The discourse framework is dynamic and reflexive, characterized by a dialogic relationship between agency and constraints.

## 6. The Discourse Framework as a Processual Model for Ideology

The analyses presented here fall together if we understand them in terms of a dynamic process. The discourse framework can be seen as a collaboratively constructed, internalized system of norms. Collusion analysis (McDermott and Tylbor, 1995; Harding, 1987; Cohn, 1987)

supports this interpretation: Groups reach implicit consensus about the way they will talk about things, and internalizing the norms makes it difficult to talk and think about things in other ways. As certain types of associations and conceptualizations become more frequent in Confederate flag discourse, participants tacitly agree on them and internalize them as natural “givens.” Then, completing a kind of cycle, in observing these norms participants reinforce a framework that privileges white experience. As participants in the discourse, pro- and anti-flaggers, blacks and whites alike, may be constrained by this framework of white privilege, and may contribute to its perpetuation.

This view of discourse frameworks as a dynamic process offers a plausible model for understanding how ideology persists—and what might be prerequisite for shift—on a large scale, and it shows how the way we use language can influence our ideas about our social relations. The framework in Confederate flag discourse is an ideological process in microcosm: the formation (and observation) of working “givens” that are the foundation for how we interpret the world. Since it is normative and feeds on its own constraints, ideology can be relatively stable and resistant to dramatic change. The greater the degree of misrecognition, the more strongly participants accept that the social reality in which they are situated is the only one possible. In letters to *The State* newspaper, readers often express an absolute past: “Which is more important, a piece of material that represents the past [*something we cannot alter*]<sup>5</sup> or misguided children who are our future?” (Lopez). These participants construe the past as an immutable state of social affairs that is not to be challenged in the present or future. Many (presumably white) flag supporters assert a static power relation that privileges them for all time, naturalizing existing power relationships so that they seem inevitable: “Bringing down the flag will not cease racism. It will forever be there not only between blacks and whites, but all colors.” (Moss); “Taking it down will not solve any racist problems we have in this state. These problems will always be here.” (Hubbard).

On the other hand, clearly, many people do challenge the assumptions in place—they address the framework, question its terms, and introduce alternative ones. As this happens, it may become possible for participants to collude around the repeated tying of alternative con-

<sup>5</sup> Addition, emphasis my own.

cepts and to create a new normative framework on which to base their social reality. By voicing their own claims on the semantic domain of identity and on social reality, individuals may expose the submerged framework to which everyone is tacitly contributing. This is crystallized by a reporter's reflections: "The only city of size is Demopolis and the only hint of history in this wide spot in the road is the Heritage Mart (an old Sam's Club) and the Heritage Motel. Neither say to what heritage the names refer." The assumptions are in place: the owners have no need to articulate what heritage is being referenced. It is when those assumptions are identified that the framework can be challenged. A local activist planning to launch an educational campaign to teach people about the treatment of African-Americans in South Carolina recognizes the overvaluing of "white Southern" perspective: "As Confederate heirs pass on the myths, legends and symbols of Southern heritage, there is an attempt to revise or rewrite history in a way that erases, clouds, distorts and denies the truth of South Carolina's foundation." (Gray). In his newspaper column, Rev. Joseph Darby regularly makes strong claims on elements of cultural experience:

"I have the Morris Islands, the Fort Pillows, the Selmas, the Birminghams, the Orangeburgs and the countless other places where nameless people of all colors suffered and died battling a system of bigotry that was born in the ante-bellum South, was at the heart of the old Confederacy and still meanly persists to the present day... I will not be demeaned, belittled, bullied or overlooked. The blood of the martyrs of my heritage will not allow me to do so. I will instead work for and settle for nothing less than a new South Carolina, where fairness, equality and unity will carry the day."

Ultimately, social transformation takes place when such oppositional references and, more importantly, parallel entailments in the subtle, unreflexive uses of language discussed earlier in this paper become ubiquitous and unmarked. This view of social transformation attests to the importance of rallies, marches, and such kinds of activism as important catalysts for social change in exposing communities and nations to different ways of thinking, to alternative conceptions of social reality. Social transformation will likely be deliberately opposed by individuals and groups who recognize their position of power and fully intend to keep it, but in recognizing this state of affairs, those who

are disadvantaged by it may imagine and bring about a different relational framework. This analysis provides some insight into what might be necessary for change to take place. It underscores the importance of asking what language *does*—to get at how power is perpetuated, and how inequality might best be addressed in practice.

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