

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the abolition of slavery in the United States. It examines the power role of discourse in maintaining and abolishing slavery in the United States, particularly the proslavery and the antislavery discourse of the antebellum South. The thesis examines two competing concepts of human bondage which originated in the proslavery and antislavery discourses—that of the *slave-as-commodity*, the proslavery concept, on the one hand, and the *slave-as-human*, the anti-slavery concept, on the other. It aims to discuss the significance of meaning shift of the word "slave" from *slave-as-commodity* to that of *slave-as-human*, the antislavery concept. Taking into account the very subjectivity of the meanings assigned to the words "black" and "slave", the thesis will demonstrate that in U.S. social and political discourse, the meaning of "slave" was not fixed and underwent significant changes over time. This thesis suggests that the abolition of slavery in the United States can be perceived as a result of "a battle for truth" between the proslavery and the antislavery discourse. The new emphasis on the universal humanity of both 'races' in the nineteenth century helped abolitionists link the issue of slavery to a progressive discourse of unalienable personal liberties. I argued that even though the discursive struggle over the nature of a slave did not decide the conflict over the institution of U.S. slavery, it helped to present the abolition of slavery as essential for the very survival of the Union. As such, it was a powerful argument that eventually helped trigger the war over slavery in the United States.