



Commodification of transformation discourses and post-apartheid institutional identities at three South African universities

Felix Banda and Lynn Mafofo

Abstract

Using mission statements from the UCT, UWC and Stellenbosch University (South Africa), we explore how the three universities have rematerialised prior discourses to rebrand their identities as dictated by contemporary national and global aspirations. We reveal how the universities have recontextualised the experiences and discourses of liberation struggle and the new government's post-apartheid social transformation discourses to construct distinctive identities that are locally relevant and globally aspiring. This has led to the semiotic refiguring of universities from spatial edifices of racially based unequal education, to equal opportunity institutions of higher learning, and to the blurring of historical boundaries between these universities. We conclude that the universities have reconstructed distinct and recognisable identities which speak to a segregated past, but with a post-apartheid voice of equity and redress.

Introduction

Focusing on mission statements, the paper explores how the University of the Western Cape (UWC), a historically black university (HBU), and two historically white universities (HWUs) the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch University (SU) have appropriated and blended aspects of the discourses of the liberation struggle and government's social transformation to market themselves as unique institutions with differentiated brand identities. Struggle discourses include the universities' (in)direct references to their role against the apartheid regime, while transformation discourses includes extrapolations from governed policy documents, especially the White Paper on Transformation of Higher Education of 1997 and the Higher Education Acts of 1997. The focus is on the commodification and repurposing of struggle and transformation discourses to advertise the universities to potential clients. Fairclough (1993) defines commodification of discourse as a more general application of instrumental or 'means-end' rationality to discourse. Commoditised discourses tend to be formulaic in their proclamations of change and hence tend to ignore differences in contexts as their effect is to normalise, homogenise, and reduce differences. We use the notion of semiotic remediation (hence forth remediation) (Prior & Hengst, 2010) to illustrate the repurposing of struggle and transformation discourses, in the universities' mission statements, as promotional discourse; which, it is argued, has led to the blurring of boundaries between previously advantaged and previously disadvantaged universities.

being both African and international. This is framed for public consumption and meant to market itself to potential clients as well as benefactors (Teo, 2007). It is worth noting that as a previously disadvantaged 'black' university, one would expect UWC to use this to market itself favourably. Ironically, this would mean accepting the imagining of UWC as an instrument of apartheid's segregated higher education, which it had rejected and sought to dismantle right from its inception. On the contrary, UWC positions itself not only as an opportunity institution, but also as one of the best universities in Africa and the world. It is for this reason that the nominal verbs in the phrase 'excellence in teaching, learning, and nurturing research', are borrowed from the discourse of educational management as 'evidence' and also to emphasise the claims to the prestigious and favourable status of the university.

In the above example, we see what can be said to be remediated (Prior & Hengst, 2010) extrapolations from government policy documents being blended with education management discourse to create what Fairclough (2003) calls marketisation discourse.

As nominalisation has potential reconstructive effects on organisational identities and social relations (Iedema, 2003), remediation of various discourses enables the reconstruction of the university's identity and its social relations in the country and the world through tapping into other social meanings and experiences, which are then repackaged as part of the new institutional identity. Thus, we see in UWC's mission statement discourses on race- based inequalities or gender biases as mentioned in both MoE (1997a) and MoE (1997b) being recontextualised as its own (UWC's) fight against inequality during the apartheid era, and further as a commitment to take the lead in transforming the new South African society through 'nurturing [its] cultural diversity ... and to [respond] in critical and creative ways to the needs of a society in transition'. In essence, UWC not only legitimatises the dominant ideological position in place (DeGenaro, 2009), it also repurposes the government's agenda of social transformation as its own marketing discourse through taking the lead in being 'critical' and 'creative' in finding solutions to problems that beset a society in transition.

On the other hand, UWC's mission statement delegitimises the apartheid ideology and social order through reference to the liberation struggle and pro-democracy claims in the following extract:

Drawing on its proud experience in the liberation struggle, the university is aware of a distinctive academic role in helping build an ... equitable and dynamic society ...

The twin adjectives in 'an equitable and dynamic society' have been refigured from political polemics and from MoE (1997a) and MoE (1997b), which keep referring to the need for a democratic, non-racial and dynamic South Africa. These twin adjectives become part of the sales-promotional elements to be consumed by prospective students and other potential clients (see also Altbach & Knight, 2007; Osman, 2006). The commodification of political discourse elevates it into new form that has to be consumed as sales-promotion text. Thus, UWC's aim is not necessarily about scoring political points or about making a political statement, but is more about being able to compete in a market place, where the present ruling regime is the biggest player. Fairclough (1993, p. 144) notes, universities are increasingly obligated to 'operate under government pressure as if they were businesses competing to sell their products to consumers'. In this case, the aim is to use the resulting discourse as selling points to

garner government support as well as to market themselves to attract potential students and institutional funders who are likely to support institutions that are mandated and have the support of the government of the day.

UWC does not directly mention black or coloured race as sales resource, but one way it has tried to distinguish itself from the other two universities is to overtly stress the liberation struggle credentials, that is, its involvement in the struggle and its defiance against the apartheid regime, which are subtly repurposed as promotional discourse. Consider the following:

In particular it aims to: **advance and protect the independence** of the **academic enterprise** ... further **global perspective** ... and contributing to South Africa's reintegration in the world community ... develop effective structures and conventions of governance, which are **democratic, transparent and accountable** ... [Our emphasis]

The literature suggests UWC refused to be a Coloured only university and defied the apartheid curriculum through modernisation of its architectural design and internationalisation of its teaching programmes (Lalu, 2012; Murray, 2012), and thus asserted its independence and aligned itself to democratic values of the rest of the free world. The text above appears to be a recontextualisation into the new South Africa of its (UWC's) past experiences and related discourses. At the same time the terminology is reframed as promotional discourse rather than as socio-political discourse. However, through blending current transformation discourses with its own struggle experiences, UWC remediates and recreates (Prior & Hengst, 2010) in the present the fight it waged against the apartheid regime to 'advance and protect the independence of the academic enterprise' and to 'develop effective structures and conventions of governance, which are democratic, transparent and accountable'. The fight against the undemocratic apartheid government in which UWC took a leading role in championing academic freedom, accountability and transparency (cf. Lalu & Murray, 2012), is transformed in the new South Africa into the university's new role to 'assist educationally disadvantaged students gain access to higher education and succeed in their studies'. This interface between the past and the present is designed to portray itself not only as a champion of societal freedom, but also as a beacon for academic freedom, thereby articulating a desirable identity for itself to potential students, South African community and the world.

UWC uses its embracing diversity at the height of apartheid as marketing point. Thaver and Mahlck (2008) describe the concept of diversity as referring to the ways in which institutions approach the management of those social groups, which are not part of the mainstream in society. Issues of ethnic/racial and gender diversity, which as noted elsewhere, form critical components of both MoE (1997a, 1997b) find focus in the mission statement as can be seen from the following extract:

Seek racial and gender inequality and contribute to helping the historically marginalised participate fully in the life of the nation ... cooperate fully with other stakeholders to develop an excellent, and therefore transformed, higher education system.

Thus, one can say that the UWC claims to play an important role in the emergence of the new democratic social order with racial and gender parity.

Recontextualising the ‘white’ past at UCT

UCT’s mission statement can be summarised as foregrounding its quality of teaching and research. While acknowledging the need for equity and redress of previously marginalised groups, it emphasises provision of lifelong skills knowledge and versatility to meet the challenges of local and international needs.

UCT’s mission statement

Our mission is to be an outstanding teaching and research university, educating for life and addressing the challenges facing our society.

Educating for life means that our educational process must provide:

- a foundation of skills, knowledge, and versatility that will last a life time, despite a changing environment,
- Research-based teaching and learning,
- Critical enquiry in the form of the search for new knowledge and better understanding, and
- an active developmental role in our cultural, economic, political, scientific, and social environment.

Addressing the challenges facing our society means that we must come to terms with our past, be cognisant of the present and plan for the future. In this, it central to our mission that we:

- recognise our location in Africa and our historical context,
- claim our place in the international community of scholars,
- strive to transcend the legacy of apartheid in South Africa and to overcome all forms of gender and other oppressive discrimination,
- be flexible on access, active in redress, and rigorous on success,
- promote equal opportunity and the full development of human potential,
- strive for inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration and synergy, and
- value and promote the contribution that all our members make to realising our mission. To equip people with lifelong skills we must and will:
- promote the love of learning, the skill of solving, problems, and the spirit of critical enquiry and research, and
- take excellence as the benchmark for all we do.

We are committed to academic freedom, critical scholarship, rational and creative thought and free enquiry. It is part of our mission to ensure that these ideals live; this necessarily requires a dynamic process of finding the balance between freedom and responsibility, rights and obligations, autonomy and accountability, transparency and efficiency, and permanence and transience; and of doing this through consultation and debated.

The mission Statement was formulated by a Working Group of the University Transformation Forum and was affirmed and adopted at a University Assembly on April 24, 1996.

Whereas UWC directly appropriates the social transformation agenda, UCT, a previously white institution does the same indirectly. Second, UCT also claims struggle credentials covertly and it also pledges to address the challenges faced by the society. It reframes its identity by repositioning itself as part of the solution in the transformation agenda.

For example, the statement starts:

Our mission is to be an outstanding teaching and research university...
Educating for life and addressing the challenges facing our society...

Then it explains its interpretation of the phrase that reads: 'educating for life'. In this statement, the possessive adjective 'our' shows the collective, confident, and assertive university team which is also indirectly claiming struggle credentials by not mentioning its past experience in the liberation struggle, but by through altruism and identifying itself with those that suffered at the hands of the apartheid. Apart from constructing itself as being at the centre of social transformation, UCT constructs itself as a leader in the world of academia. The reference to quality outputs recreates and recounts the university's academic activity as modelled on industrial production. Moreover, the use of the adjective 'outstanding', is designed to project a prestigious stance as it describes the university as an exceptional institution. Even the phrase 'educating for life' compliments the quality of education they provide as permanent and it adds up to the unique and prestigious identity the university is captivating in advertising itself. This supports Wernick's (1991) argument that universities are now entangled in competitive, promotional culture.

The middle part of the mission statement further reconstructs UCT a previously white institution into a new inclusive identity. This is done through claiming a localised space in Africa. UCT thus divorces its 'white' and European-oriented past for an African identity:

it is central to our mission that we recognise our location in Africa...strive to transcend the legacy of apartheid in South Africa and to overcome all forms of gender and the other oppressive discrimination...

These remarks show UCT appropriating a mixture of social, political, and gender discourses as a way to claim social transformation as its own agenda. Specifically, this appears to be in part a reframing into promotional discourse of Section 1.14 of MoE (1997a) cited above. The phrase 'strive to transcend the legacy of apartheid in South Africa' juxtaposed as it is here with '... location in Africa ...' has by design or default double meaning. First, it can be seen as UCT owning up to its past as a white institution at which non-white groups were denied access. Second, the phrase puts UCT at the centre of the fight for emancipation and the struggle against the apartheid legacy. The latter was claimed by UWC in its mission statement. In this way like UWC, UCT has put itself at the centre of the government's transformation agenda. Additionally, UCT claims a shared common ground with (African) readers through constant use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our'. This in turn enables UCT to subtly claim a collective African identity, while divorcing itself from its British (white) heritage. In addition, in remediating Section 1.21 in MoE, 1997a, p. 12) entitled 'Quality' about the need for higher education to pursue 'the principle of quality [by] maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at' the clause 'we must take excellence as the benchmark for all we do' serves to position the university as a prestigious institution driven by quality and it also serves as a way of advertising itself to potential

students or stakeholders. Wernick (1991, p. 181) points out that the generalisation of promotion, has a communicative function as discourse can be perceived as 'a vehicle for selling goods, services, organisations and ideas or people across orders of discourse'. UCT chooses inclusivity and superiority in academia as one of points of reference to make it admirable and to mark its idiosyncratic identity from other universities under study.

Arguably, the phrase 'be flexible on access in active redress and rigorous on success' is (almost) not only a direct quote from government's policy document cited elsewhere, it can also be taken to mean that UCT is aware of its past injustices and sees 'redress' as a way to atone the past wrongs. Thus, it can be said that this is a social discourse designed to provide a pleasant and egalitarian learning environment open to everyone in the new era. In these phrases too, the blending of educational and social discourses is seen as another way UCT subtly claims 'struggle credentials' through drawing on and reframing past and current social discourses on 'restructuring'. This enables UCT to claim ownership of social transformation as crystallised in the phrasing in; '[we] promote equal opportunity and the full development of human potential'. Whereas the first part seems to emphasise the egalitarian dispensation in late modern society, the latter is a general social statement which could be taken to refer to the black empowerment equity – the South African government's blueprint to fast track blacks into the formal economy and leadership positions denied to them during the apartheid era.

Therefore, through this recreated identity the university is able to redirect readers' attention away from its past to the new mission in which it strategically claims to be in the forefront, promoting education freedom and diversity in the country and globally. UCT subtly selects the paradigmatic choices in presenting an acceptable inclusive identity in the new South Africa. The discursive representations show that the university is cast in a serving, meeting, and responding role to the needs of the society and actively reshaping them. Rather than write in such a way that draws a sharp contrast between the past and the present identities, UCT mission statement is written in such way that current aspirations blur its past role. UWC does the opposite as it openly flaunts its past, especially the struggle credentials as an inclusive university to reshape its current identity.

It is noteworthy that UCT casts the relationship between the university and the economy world as a partnership. This foregrounds equality and its pledge to eradicate the social ills that were imposed by the previous ruthless regime. This move foregrounds social responsibility while the commercial aspect is downgraded into the background. However, the reference to excellent quality output projects UCT academic activity to be modelled on industrial production comparable to the best universities in the world. Additionally, UCT emphasises not only social and economic transformation, but also uses the language of rapid movement, such as 'rigorous, active'. This ties in with Barnett's (2003, p. 66) characterisation of the entrepreneurial university as being 'restless' and 'always on the move'. Thus, UCT is able to draw from the different discourses available to put across a forward-looking mission statement that is ideal for cultivating the society that was once tormented by the ruthless hand of the apartheid regime.

Rehabilitating Afrikaans

SU's mission statement is similar to UCT's in as much as it emphasises excellence in academic and research activities, and it places the community at the centre of its endeavours. Like UCT, SU

stresses that it seeks to contribute and be a major player in South Africa's, Africa's and global aspirations.

SU's mission statement and vision

The *raison d'être* of the university of Stellenbosch is to create and sustain in commitment to the academic ideal of excellent scholarly and scientific practice an environment within which knowledge can be discovered, can be shared and can be applied to the benefit of the community.

With this vision statement, SU commits itself to an outward-oriented role with South Africa, Africa and globally. SU:

- is an academic institution of excellence and a respected partner
- contributes towards building the scientific, technological, and intellectual capacity of Africa
- is an active role-player in the development of the South African society
- promotes Afrikaans as a language of teaching and science in a multilingual context
- promotes equity, in terms (inter alia) of the bringing about of a corps of excellent students and academic and administrative staff members that is demographically more representative of South African society, must be fundamental to all our actions, including our redress of the inequalities of the past and our repositioning of the University for the future. (Extracts from the Strategic Framework)

What stands out in SU's mission statement is its overt choice to maintain its previous identity centred on Afrikaans through casting it in a new and positive way. It redefines Afrikaans and weaves it into the multilingual discourses that have become part of the new South Africa's transformation agenda.

SU opted for a mission statement that is overtly painted with the prestige discourse to persuade potential stakeholders as compared to the other universities. The mission statement reads in part as:

The *raison d'être* of the University of Stellenbosch is ... to create and sustain, in commitment to the academic ideal of excellent scholarly and scientific practice, an environment within which knowledge can be discovered, can be shared, and can be applied to the benefit of the community.

The presence of a French phrase in the English text, which means, 'motive', is not by accident or lack of English phrases. It appears calculated to cast the university as a prestigious and sophisticated 'global' institution. Ironically, even though the phrase is often used in English discourses, it gives credence to SU's stance to promote multilingualism and diversity in the modern and globalised world.

Downplaying the perception in the past of Afrikaans as the language of oppression, the university does not hesitate to publicly announce that it is an Afrikaans medium institution which 'promotes Afrikaans as language of teaching and science in a multilingual context'. The SU mission statement reconstructs Afrikaans as marginalised as the other indigenous languages

such as Xhosa. Thus, in solidarity with other marginalised languages, SU makes its mission to help develop Afrikaans as a language of education. In the process, SU not only acknowledges multilingualism as inscribed in the South African constitution, it also appropriates government agenda to promote multilingualism and diversity as its own mission. Therefore, the images of an institution, which was in the past seen as part of the apartheid machinery and Afrikaans as the language of oppression, in the mission statement, are semiotically re-materialised to carry new and desirable characteristics to all racial groups.

Moreover, the choice of words used such as ‘to create, sustain, academic, ideal, of scholarly, and scientific practice’ is intended to give the reader the picture that the university is not only innovative but is also a global player with an international status. These are the kinds of common vocabulary used in the world organisations such as United Nations, World Bank, and other international corporations, and are also examples of globalisation discourse (Fairclough, 1993, 2003).

Like the other universities, SU also emphasises inclusiveness and tries to put itself at the centre of the transformation agenda, albeit covertly by articulating its aspired role in the present era and asserting its African identity. SU is reconstructed not only as an ‘Active role-player in the development of the South African society ...’ but also on the African continent. This is shown by the absolute manner in which it identifies itself as an ‘academic institution of excellence and a respected partner [which] contributes towards building the scientific, technological, and intellectual capacity of Africa’. Even from these restricted textual environments, one can still identify key motifs and discursive representations that the university holds: the university puts itself at the forefront of Africa’s technological and intellectual development as part of its identification process. Thus, even though there is no mention of struggle credentials, the university subtly manages to push the transformation agenda. This is because its claim to be the driving force behind the African continent’s progression into the economy world puts it at the forefront of Africa’s political and socio-economic emancipation. In similarity to UCT, this move backgrounds the commercial exchange processes involved and foregrounds helping Africa (the third world) to prosper. This helps SU not only to divest itself from the negative associations of the past, but it effectively renegotiates its relationship with local, national, regional, and the global institutions and role players. In essence, SU repositions itself to aspire to the same dictates as UWC and UCT.

Summary and conclusion

By using interdiscursivity and intertextuality together with the notion of remediation, we are able to show that the universities are not merely referring to prior texts; they use these texts as semiotic resources, which they transform into mission statements used to market themselves and to construct differentiated brand identities. Although drawing on the same semiotic materials, choices in selection, restructuring and manner of transformation enable the universities to achieve expanded meanings, which markets them as unique and differentiated brands.

From the points raised above, we argue that in the democratic dispensation in South Africa, the commodification of struggle and transformation discourse has blurred the trajectories of the historicity of the universities in such a way that they appear not dissimilar and show a rejection of the apartheid values and ideologies under which the institutions were created. The

boundaries between previously white and previously black universities has been further blurred by the changing student and academic profiles as the transformation discourses on which the universities draw their inspirations demand that there must be no gender, racial, ethnicity, regional (etc) biases in the make-up of the universities' populace. Moreover, this call for openness and inclusive citizenship has been blended with globalising aspirations in which universities worldwide strive for equal opportunities and global transnational recognition. What we saw in the previous sections is that the appropriated discourses have been repurposed for marketing the universities as objects of desire to which all racial, ethnic, national, etc. groups are welcome to consume the best in academia. This has led to commodification of struggle and transformation discourses, leading also to new forms of contested values, identities and in particular, notion of community. The apartheid ideology of a community as being constituted by people who share a particular race or ethnicity has been replaced by the notion of non-bounded and non-homogenous people who share similar vision of freedom and common good of humanity. Thus, even though UWC as a previously black university and UCT and SU as previously white universities followed different paths and had difference experiences, the new dispensation has directed them towards a similar goal of an equitable and transformative society in which race and ethnicity are not a differentiating and disqualification factor.

Therefore, the repurposing of struggle and current social transformation discourses into marketisation discourses in mission statements projects the three universities as forward-looking. The discourses are designed to be consumed as inspirational but differentiated brand identity positions, which in turn provide direction, purpose, and meaning to each of the three universities (Aaker, 1996). In short the appropriated discourses shape the three universities' identities and how they are to be perceived and consumed.

The study shows that the ideology of a non-racial society and equal opportunities championed in post-apartheid South Africa as well as translocal and transnational demands for academic excellence have necessitated the need for South African universities to develop and cultivate new entrepreneurial endeavours that are locally located and relevant but international in scope. Race as a defining feature of the universities has been replaced with commoditised discourses of transformation, redress, and equal opportunity. The study demonstrates that each of the universities have reworked cultural, political, educational, and promotional materials to create commoditised discourses of transformation and marketisation. In the process they have created independent and unique identities which they use as points of sale in the 'worldwide market for students and the ceaseless search for research funding and prestige' (Deem, Lucas, & Mok, 2008, p. 84).

Disclosure statement

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Notes on Contributors

Felix Banda lectures in the Department of Linguistics at the UWC, where he teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses in multilingualism in society and education and technology-mediated business communication and intercultural communication. His research interests include the discursive construction of identities in society and education and the semiotics of corporate identity branding and advertising, youth, and hip hop cultures.

Linguistics Department, University of the Western Cape, P/B X 17, Bellville 7535, (Cape Town), South Africa. E-mail: fbanda@uwc.ac.za

Lynn Mafofo is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Linguistics at the UWC. Her research interests are in the sociolinguistics of media, business and organisational communication, institutional branding, corporate identities, and globalisation in late modern society. Linguistics Department, University of the Western Cape, P/B X 17, Bellville 7535, (Cape Town), South Africa. E-mail: lymafofo@gmail.com

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