

Construals of activism in the testimony of Colin de Souza

Zannie Bock

University of the Western Cape

1. Introduction

In this paper, I analyse the testimony of Colin de Souza given before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the mid-1990s.¹ My aim is to explore how De Souza projects an identity of himself as 'agentive', as an innovative and flexible individual who is capable of outwitting and outmaneuvering his opponents despite the fact that within the TRC context, he is positioned as a 'victim' of human rights abuse. To substantiate this argument, I use a number of Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) tools to analyse the way in which this agency is encoded in the language of the testimony.

I have selected this focus for my festschrift contribution as I first met Anne-Marie over a draft of my 'De Souza' PhD chapter on a visit to Ghent University in 2006. Her comments were extremely helpful and our contact has subsequently grown into a very productive and enriching exchange between herself and our department at the University of the Western Cape.

2. Context

The TRC emerged as part of the negotiated transition to democracy in 1994. It aimed to promote national unity and reconciliation through the establishment of as truthful a record as possible of the "nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights" committed under apartheid (*TRC Report 1* 1998: 56). As part of this process, the TRC held a number of public hearings in 1996 and 1997 at which both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations had the chance to tell their stories.

The TRC positioned testifiers as either 'perpetrators' of human rights abuse or 'victims' who suffered their consequences. Victims were defined as people against whom some gross human rights violation had been committed, and perpetrators referred to the people who had committed those gross violations of human rights (*TRC Report / 1998*: 59). Gross violations of human rights were in turn defined as "the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill treatment" or the conspiracy or attempt to commit such acts (*TRC Report 1* 1998: 60).

The problems with these definitions have been explored by a number of researchers (Ross 2003). The TRC acknowledged these problems, including the implied passivity of the term, 'victim', the lack of distinction between different kinds of perpetrators, and the difficulties of defining the different categories of gross violations of human rights. However, it decided to use the term, victim, on the grounds that "the person against whom that violation is committed can only be described as a victim, regardless of whether he or she emerged as a survivor" (*TRC Report 1* 1998: 59).

A number of contextual factors played a part in shaping the testimonies given before the TRC. For example, the Human Rights Violations (I (RV) hearings at which victims testified were formal public events and included ritualistic elements, such as an opening prayer and address by the chairperson (usually Archbishop Tutu) and the swearing of an oath by the testifiers. Testifiers were invited to give their testimonies in the language of their choice and an interpreting service was provided to facilitate this. Although the testifiers were given the freedom to "tell their story in their own words" and were generally allowed to speak without interruption, the testimonies were clearly co-constructed events: the commissioners had access to the testifiers' written statements before the hearing and helped them prepare for the public event (McCormick *et al* 2006). They also introduced the testifiers — thus positioning them in particular ways - ant] were able to ask questions both during and after the telling of the main narrative. Blommaert *et al* (2006) and Verdoolaege (2008) point to the ways in which these interjections shaped particular positions for the testifiers and promoted TRC discourses of suffering and reconciliation. In addition, there was a strong media presence, both national and international, as well as a public audience, further adding to the interactional nature of the event.

Colin de Souza and his mother, Dorothy de Souza, testified at the HRV hearing held at the University of the Western Cape on 5 August 1996. De Souza spoke for 38 minutes, after which his mother spoke for a further 9 minutes about the effects of his activism on the family. Thereafter, a number of commissioners asked De Souza questions, following which the chairperson thanked the testifiers and concluded with some general remarks about the significance of the testimony. Both De Souza and his mother testified in English although they both briefly code-switched into Afrikaans at points.

De Souza was part of a group of youths aged between 14 and 18 years who, in 1985, formed a self-defence unit in the township of Bonteheuwel, outside Cape Town, in response to increasing levels of state repression and harassment. The eighties was a decade of intense resistance against the apartheid regime, which, inside the country, was spearheaded by the youth, who also bore the brunt of police repression (Marks &

McKenzie 1998). In the words of Qasim Williams (2004), another member of the Bonteheuwel Military Wing (BMW), "the purpose of the organisation was to protect ourselves and our community from the apartheid police system" and defend "ourselves" against "injustice, violation of basic human rights and police brutality".

De Souza's testimony focuses on the state response to his activities in the anti-apartheid struggle during the period 1987 to 1989. He endured repeated experiences of harassment, arrest, interrogation, torture and detention. The state finally sentenced him to two years' imprisonment in 1989, which he served until he was released in 1990 under one of the state indemnities for political prisoners after the release of Nelson Mandela.

Although in terms of the TRC terminology De Souza appeared as a 'victim' of human rights violations, I will argue in this paper that, in this testimony, he chooses rather to style himself as someone who has 'agency' - who is capable of outwitting and outmaneuvering his opponents. I am using the term, 'agency', after Fairclough (2003: 145) to refer to De Souza's construal of himself as an "activated social actor", as a participant who does things and makes them happen, rather than as someone who is primarily affected by the actions of others.

3. Research Aims

This main aim of this research paper is to explore how De Souza styles himself as an activist within the context of this TRC hearing and how his linguistic choices (in terms of genre, appraisal and transitivity) serve to construe him as agentive. Given the space constraints of this paper, I can only present the analysis of one extract. However, in the larger study from which this paper is drawn, additional extracts are presented as further evidence of the above argument (Bock 2007). Additionally Bock (2007) analyses in detail the testimonies of three other activists and one family member from the same sociolinguistic background.

4. Theoretical framework

This paper is informed by theories which view narrative, identity and style as constructions that emerge through social interaction and which are shaped by broader social and cultural discourses. Narratives — or the stories people tell about themselves and others — are widely recognised as a site for the construction and display of identity (Bamberg 2007). In the display of these identities, speakers may draw on a variety of styles which express different personal and interpersonal meanings. In Coupland's (2007: 111) words, "identity work can be defined as "a

partially controlled process of outward-directed self-representation through some mode of styling".

Style, according to Coupland (2007: 1-2) refers to "a way of doing something" which involves a degree of "crafting" and includes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements (e.g. clothing, hair, gestures, facial expressions, prosody). Styling, like identity work, has an interactional dimension in that it needs to be actively read and interpreted by listeners and speakers to be meaningful. While individuals may style themselves by drawing upon broader socio-cultural discourses, they also have "stylistic agency" in that they may combine these elements in unexpected ways (Stroud & Wee 2005). Therefore, an analysis of style, argue Stroud & Wee (2005: 322), should take into account both the "particularities of an individual's goals and desires" and the effect of the contexts which are shaping this performance.

In this paper, I shall argue that De Souza styles himself as an activist by drawing on particular discourses of activism and resistance and combining these in unique ways. In making this argument, I use a number of SFL tools suggested by Martin & Rose (2003), in particular, genre, appraisal and transitivity, to substantiate this analysis. A genre analysis refers to the way in which texts are typically structured and realised within any situation of communication, an appraisal analysis accounts for the ways in which participants encode their attitudes and feelings and negotiate relations with their audiences, and a transitivity analysis gives an indication of how speakers or writers construe their realities and perceive events as unfolding and participants as relating (Halliday 2004, Martin & Rose 2003, Martin & White 2005). Space precludes an extended review of these theories, which, it can be assumed, will be well known to readers of this *Festschrift*. Therefore, only brief reference to relevant theoretical concepts will be made in the body of the analysis.

5. Methodology

I obtained my data by downloading the transcription of the testimony from the TRC's website and checking this against the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) audio-visual record of the hearing which enabled me not only to correct inaccuracies in the transcript but also to observe the non-linguistic aspects of context, such as prosody, gesture, facial expressions and audience interaction.² I then broke the text into clauses and analysed it from the different SFL perspectives. The extract for analysis comes after De Souza has been speaking almost uninterruptedly for 22:30 minutes and is three minutes long. It was chosen for detailed analysis as it constitutes a complete narrative in terms of its generic form and displays many of the features which are typical of De Souza's style (Bock 2007).¹

6. Extract and Analysis

Extract 1 follows an account of how, after his second arrest and imprisonment in 1988, De Souza was released into the custody of his parents. It recalls how, that same night, a group of comrades came to kill him after the police had spread rumours in the community that he was an informer. This was a strategy used by the police to sow mistrust and confusion in communities and so break their resistance.

Extract 1 can be analysed as a Narrative. The choice of this genre — as opposed to the Recount - enables De Souza to construe himself as a hero who faces and overcomes adversity. The SFL description of Narrative follows the six-part structure of Labov & Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) in which a Narrative typically begins with an Orientation which introduces the main participants and locates the story in time and space. This stage is followed by the Complicating Action in which the protagonist, who may be powerful or powerless and act alone or with others, faces a series of problematic experiences culminating in a crisis which is then resolved by the actions of the protagonist in the Resolution stage (Martin & Plum 1997). The evaluation of the Narrative gives it its significance and these meanings typically cluster in a discrete stage - the Evaluation — between the Complication and Resolution, although they may also be dispersed throughout the Narrative. Additional stages include an optional Abstract and Coda, neither of which is represented in this data.

The Recount, by comparison, focuses on the events and how they relate to each other, construing them as 'expected' even when they are horrific or tragic, rather than on their culmination in a crisis which is resolved by the protagonist (Martin & Plum 1997). It may be considered the 'unmarked' choice for personal narratives (Jordens 2002) and much of De Souza's testimony can be described as such. His choice of the Narrative genre here is therefore significant as it allows him to construe himself as agentive in relation to this attack.

The genre analysis of Extract 1 is presented below. The generic labels are inserted in bold caps and the circumstantial elements which function as marked themes are underlined. These function to 'scaffold discontinuity' and indicate shifts in the organisation of the information (i.e. between stages or phases in the genre) (Martin & Rose 2003).

EXTRACT1: GENERIC ANALYSIS

ORIENTATION

I went with my father to Woodstock where I washed and my brother-in-law Kevin was also with me. And the night here around about six o'clock because I had to be seven o'clock in - in my house, six o'clock we returned to Bonteheuwel where I stayed at 21B Candlewood Street.

COMPLICATING ACTION

At that - at that same time I was still busy eating my food and I heard this familiar knock on the door, and I was standing inside the - inside the - nearby the toiler you know in the - near to the sitting room you know, and I heard the comrades Jacques Adonis he was asking, Mrs. de Souza, Mrs. de Souza is Porky here? My mother said, no Porky isn't here, he is somewhere else, he is not sleeping at - at home. And they said, then they said okay, we did watch you the whole time, we knew Porky were here, Porky came with you.

And apparently at that time Jacques draw out a gun to force his way into the house like to shoot me and my father grabbed him and there was a whole twist outside and my brother-in-law - he hit Jacques you know and the gun fall - fall over the balcony right down you know and they chased the group, it was a group of youths was about sixteen of them you know, some of them were with me in this - in this trials of the BMW and the chase went right around the street and my father and my brother-in-law they arrived.

At that time I had a firearm but it was for my own purpose. I took out the firearm, I put it underneath my jersey, I went outside because I check, now it's too dangerous to be inside the house and I want to move now, out of the area.

As we were still standing outside to move, this group of comrades - and there was some gangsters also with - they came shooting around the corner. Before even they take the bend the shots was firing and they were shooting and throwing bricks and my mother and my father they ran into this - and with my baby brother - ran into this people downstairs house, that the — the - their surname were Brooks, they ran into this house and these people locked the door, and I and my - my brother-in-law Kevin Arendse was still outside, locked outside. The people inside didn't want to open the door and here these people were preparing to shoot and there was like a big fight you know and one guy he was - he was still trying to - to cock the gun but the gun jammed you know.

RESOLUTION

And at that time as I was shouting, open the door, the people inside opened the door and as my brother-in-law Kevin Arendse and I ran into the house, and the door closed, the shots just went down and the bullets ran through the doors and through the windows and all that.

Extract 1 includes only the obligator}' stages of Orientation, Complicating Action and Resolution. The Evaluation, as the appraisal analysis will show, is dispersed throughout the Narrative, although evaluative meanings do cluster at the point of crisis just before the Resolution.

I shall now offer a detailed analysis of Extract 1, indicating how De Souza builds narrative tension (primarily via appraisal resources of graduation) towards a prosodic climax. Each stage of the genre is analysed separately and reproduced below clause by clause. The appraisal resources are marked in bold.

ORIENTATION

1. I went with my father to Woodstock⁴
2. where I washed
3. and my brother-in-law Kevin was also with me
4. and the night here around about six o'clock because I had to be seven o'clock in my house
5. six o'clock we returned to Bonteheuwel
6. where I stayed at 21B Candlewood Street

The Orientation introduces the main 'heroes' of this Narrative, namely De Souza, his father and his brother-in-law, and indicates the location for the Narrative, namely, his home in Bonteheuwel. The specificity of the address, 21B Candlewood Street points, I would argue, to his awareness that the credibility of a TRC testimony rests in part on the accurate recall of names, dates and places. His reference to needing to be home by seven o'clock is a reference to his bail conditions.

The Complicating Action can be divided into four 'phases'. 'Phase' is the term used by Martin & Rose (2003: 9) to describe the ordering of information within a stage. These phases may be variable or even quite unique to a text, unlike generic stages which are relatively stable across texts. I analyse each phase separately:

COMPLICATING ACTION

Phase 1: 'the knock'

7. At that - at that same time I was still busy eating my food
8. and I heard this familiar knock on the door
9. and I was standing inside the - inside the - nearby the toilet you know in the -
near to the sitting room you know
10. and I heard the comrades
11. Jacques Adonis he was asking
12. Mrs. de Souza, Mrs. de Souza is Porky here,
13. my mother said
14. no Porky isn't here
15. he is somewhere else
16. he is not sleeping at home.
17. And they said,
18. then they said
19. okay, we did watch you the whole time,
20. we knew
21. Porky were here,
22. Porky came with you

In this first phase, the circumstantial element, "at that same time" (clause 7), marks a shift in the staging and indicates to the audience that a new stage in the Narrative (i.e. Complicating Action) is about to begin. The use of the continuative, "still", in "I was still busy eating my food" also signals to the audience that, in this case, a normal daily routine is about to be disrupted. According to Martin & Rose (2003), continuatives are a counter-expectancy resource which serve to acknowledge the audience's expectations in the process of text construction.

Elements of Orientation are infused in clauses 7 and 9 through the use of the past continuous tense ("was eating", "was standing") — these describe the behaviour which the first Complicating Action ("I heard this familiar knock on the door") disrupts. De Souza then recalls how he overhears the conversation between his mother and his comrade, Jacques Adonis. This dialogue forms the focus of this first phase of the Complicating Action and has, predictably, the highest concentration of verbal processes ("was asking", "said"). However, although De Souza is an eavesdropper in this scene, he still presents this scene as refracted through his senses with the repetition of the clause, "I heard" in clauses 8 and 10 ("I heard this familiar knock on the door / and I heard the comrades..."). An alternative formulation might have been: "There was a familiar knock..." and "The comrades asked...". However, the fact that De Souza thematises himself (as "I") and positions himself as the Senser of the mental

process, "heard", means that we read what follows from his standpoint, thereby foregrounding him and his perceptions. This phase includes a number of syntactic and lexical repetitions:

Mrs. de Souza, Mrs. de Souza
is Porky here / Porky isn't here / Porky were here
he is somewhere else / he is not sleeping at home,
my mother said / and they said / then they said we
did watch you / we knew Porky were here / Porky
came with you

Repetitions are a graduation appraisal resource which intensify the force and increase the narrative tension. The repetition of Mrs. de Souza's name is part of this pattern, as well as an indication that Mrs. de Souza and Jacques Adonis are known to each other. Even though Adonis has come to shoot her son, he still uses the polite and socially acceptable form of address ("Mrs. de Souza"), a superficial acknowledgement of a moral order of respect and decency which the events that follow subvert.

The fact that the dialogue between Adonis and Mrs. de Souza is presented in direct speech (as opposed to reported speech) heightens the narrative immediacy of the telling. Schiffirin (1981: 58) argues that tense shifts from past to the historical present in oral narratives frequently function as internal evaluation devices by making the past "more vivid by bringing past events into the moment of speaking" thereby increasing the dramatic impact of the story.

In the second phase, reprinted below, the Complicating Action reaches an initial prosodic climax as De Souza recounts how his father and brother-in-law repelled the comrades. The graduation resources are highlighted in bold:

Phase 2: 'the fight'

23. and apparently at that time Jacques draw out a gun to force his way into the house

Like to shoot me

24. and my father grabbed him

25. and there was a whole twist outside

26. and my brother-in-law - he hit Jacques you know

27. and the gun fall - fall over the balcony right down you know

28. and they chased the group,

29. it was a group of youths

30. it was about sixteen of them you know.

31. Some of them were with me in this - in this trials of the BMW

32. and the chase went right around the street

33. and my father and my brother-in-law they arrived

His use of the evidential, "apparently", suggests that this description is based on someone else's account, most probably his father's or his brother-in-law's. It is also, perhaps, a way of hedging his statement as he does not wish to accuse his comrade directly of drawing a gun on his father.

The infused intensification of the words, "force" and "grabbed" (as opposed to say, "push" and "caught") act as a graduation resource and add intensity to the actions (Martin & White 2005). The heightened prosody is continued by the metaphor, "whole twist", which graphically depicts what was obviously a scuffle between Adonis and De Souza's father and brother-in-law.

The Narrative reaches a prosodic climax for the first time at the point where he describes the gun falling over the balcony (clause 27). This high point is signaled by the phrase, "right down", where "right" serves to intensify the meaning of "down", and is an example of what Martin & White (2005) refer to as 'sharpening the focus' through the addition of grading, or intensified meaning, to a phenomenon (like "falling") which is inherently non-gradable. Note that this pattern continues in clause 32: "and the chase went right around the street".

Although there is no explicit evaluation of the actions of either his father and brother-in-law, or the comrades, his description of how they chased away sixteen gun-toting and brick-throwing youths is surely meant to invoke our admiration. I would argue that this is part of his construal of himself as agentive: his focus is on the actions of the main participants, as he construes his family members (and by extension, himself) as people who are able to take action against their opponents.

In the third phase, reproduced below, De Souza is once again the main participant as the Narrative places him centre-stage. The reason why I have analysed this as a separate phase is because it focuses on him alone, as the predominant participant. This is a change from the second phase, in which he did not appear as a participant, and different to the fourth phase, in which he appears together with family members. The third and fourth phases also begin with circumstantial elements as theme which suggests some kind of boundary at clauses 34 and 42.

Phase 3: 'strategising'

- 34. At that time I had a firearm
- 35. but it was for my own purpose.
- 36. I took out the firearm,
- 37. I put it underneath my jersey,

38. I went outside
39. because I check
40. now it's too dangerous to be inside the house.
41. And I want to move now, out of the area.

In this phase, the predominant processes are material ("took", "put", "went") and mental ("check", "want") as he construes himself as acting and strategising in his own defense. Note how he uses the historical present tense in clauses 39-41 (I check / it's too dangerous / I want to move) to mark a resumption of the narrative tension. Once again, this choice serves to increase the narrative immediacy of the telling (Schiffrin 1981).

In the next and fourth phase, De Souza describes how the comrades returned, this time with "some gangsters", to attack his family. Here "comrades" is a positive judgment of social sanction, whereas "gangster" is a negative one. This surprising collocation points to the underhand role played by the state in sowing mistrust and division in communities, where the boundaries between two social groups (comrades and gangsters) could be blurred as a result of police interference and disinformation. It is also justification for why he carried a gun - for his own protection.

Phase Four brings the Narrative to its second and final climax, and the end of the Complicating Action, as De Souza and his brother-in-law are trapped outside the locked door in the face of the comrades' guns. Once again, the graduation resources (highlighted in bold) signal the prosodic climax.

Phase 4: 'the shooting'

42. As we were still standing outside to move
43. this group of comrades — and there was some gangsters also with
44. they came shooting around the corner.
45. Before even they take the bend
46. the shots was firing
47. and they were shooting
48. and throwing bricks
49. and my mother and my father they ran into this -
50. and with my baby brother - ran into this people downstairs house,
51. that the - the - their surname were Brooks,
52. they ran into this house
53. and these people locked the door,
54. and I and my - my brother-in-law Kevin Arendse was still outside,

55. locked OUTside.
56. The people inside didn't want to open the door
57. and here these people were preparing to shoot
58. and there was like a BIG fight you know
59. and one guy he was — he was still trying to cock the gun
60. but the gun jammed you know

The repetition of "shots/shooting" indicate that the tension is again swelling towards a moment of prosodic prominence. As the action gathers momentum, so the predominant process is again material (e.g. "came shooting", "take the bend", "was firing", "were shooting", "throwing", "ran" x 3, "locked"). The Narrative reaches a prosodic climax in clauses 54 and 55 where De Souza and his brother-in-law are "still outside / locked outside". The climax is heightened through the tonal emphasis in the spoken version on "I" and "OUTside", as well as through the repetition of "outside".

At this point, clauses 56 and 57 ("The people inside didn't want to open the door / and here these people were preparing to shoot") evaluate and suspend the action. Clause 56 is a token of negative affect which invokes the neighbors' feelings of fear. This moment of tension is further heightened by the addition of grading force through the raised intonation on "big" in "like a BIG fight" (clause 58). However, fortunately the gun jammed and this gave De Souza and his brother-in-law the break they needed to escape.

In the Resolution stage, the crisis is resolved by De Souza who shouts to the people in the house to open up, which they eventually do. In this way, De Souza casts himself as a hero — able to outmaneuver his opponents, even when trapped and in danger of death:

RESOLUTION

61. and at that time as I was shouting
62. open the door,
63. the people inside opened the door
64. and as my brother-in-law Kevin Arendse and I ran into the house,
65. and the door closed
66. the shots just went down
67. and the bullets ran through the doors and through the windows and all that.

The transitivity patterns in clauses 46, 60 and 65-67 bear closer inspection. These clauses occur at points where De Souza describes moments of extreme personal

danger for himself and his family members. At these moments when the opposing forces seem to be gaining the upper hand and De Souza is closest to losing his agency (in Fairclough's sense of 'being in control'), the Actors shift from social actors (human participants) to inanimate participants ("the door", "the shots", and "the bullets"). This has the effect of effacing the external cause of the process. In terms of Halliday's (2004) ergative analysis, "the door", "shots" and "the bullets" would be analysed as Medium. The Medium, according to Halliday (2004: 292) is not "the doer, nor the causer, but the one that is critically involved, in some way or other according to the particular nature of the process". In this sense, the inanimate participants appear to have a will of their own and the processes seem 'self-engendered'. This choice enables De Souza to suppress the identity of the 'real agents', the comrades, thereby diminishing the latter's agency and correspondingly his own loss of control.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis in Section 6 has explored how De Souza's choice of the Narrative genre enables him to construe himself as a hero and how he builds narrative tension via graduation resources. It has argued that this is part of how he styles himself as agentive and enacts his identity as an activist within the context of this TRC hearing. The transitivity choices support this argument both in terms of his preference for material processes of which he is the Actor and in the way he suppresses the agency of his opponents at critical moments (see also Bock & Duncan 2006). The 'flip side' to this construal, however, is the elision of any reference to suffering. In his testimony, as in Extract 1 above, he consistently avoids explicit evaluation of his own feelings or judgements about the morality or immorality of his opponents' actions.

Anecdotes from other testimonies and research on the discourses of activists suggest that this was a common pattern in the testimonies of activists. Ross (2003: 6), for example, in her analysis of women's testimonies, argues that many activists were proud of their achievements as freedom fighters and were reluctant to identify themselves as "sites of harm". They therefore chose narrative conventions which positioned them as powerful in relation to their past political activities. Elizabeth Floyd, a trade union activist in the 1980s, speaks of a "culture of silence" which emerged among activists, in part, she argues, as a form of resistance, because to admit "that the struggle had damaged you was [to admit] that the security police had got the better of you" (Johannesburg hearings, 29 April 1996).

Through the various discursive choices that De Souza makes, he locates his activism within a conception of his own individual creativity and capacity for action. In

this sense, on this occasion, his presentation of himself draws on activist discourses of resistance and agency and not on TRC discourses of victimhood and suffering.

Notes

1. Colin de Souza has read an earlier version of this paper and is happy with the argument it makes and with mc publishing this paper.
2. My thanks to Mary Bock and Kay McCormick for lending me the audio visual records from their private collection. Audiovisual copies of many testimonies are available at the National Archives in Pretoria.
3. I have, in total, analysed 322 clauses of his testimony in detail (40% of his 38 minute testimony).
4. De Souza told me in personal communication (2009) that he meant Mitchell's Plain here, not Woodstock. Both areas are in and around Cape Town.

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