

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).

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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