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Sorina Chiper, *Discourse Studies in Practice*

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SORINA CHIPER

DISCOURSE STUDIES IN PRACTICE

Preface by Steen SCHOUSBOE

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The Discourse of Romanian Universities*

The Revolution of 1989 marked the beginning of a large-scale process of political, economic and social change. Whereas the impulse of the Revolution was the revolt against communism, lack of individual freedom and poverty, currently the engine of change is the desire to observe European norms and to reach European standards of living.

Nothing lasts longer than transition, and at present, Romania is still struggling with ghosts from the past. Despite angry voices claiming that post-Revolution governments have deformed rather than reformed systems and institutions, improvements are visible in many fields, including education. This article will address the discourse of Romanian universities as a mirror of the reformation process in the national higher educational system. The reasons that have grounded my topic choice are personal: on the one hand, the university is the milieu I am more familiar with and, on the other hand, I am confident that the reformation of universities plays a crucial part in the large-scale renewal of patterns of thinking and acting, personal and collective values, and lifestyles.

* *Journal of Organizational Change Management* (2006), vol. 19 (6), special issue “Romania: Untapped Intellectual and Spiritual Capital”, guest-edited by Gerald W. Ramey, pp. 713-724.

Methodology and research

My focus will be on external and internal communication, on institutional identity and the symbiosis of orders of discourse. I shall first highlight the prospective EU integration as a major trigger of change in the Romanian educational system; second, I shall draw upon Critical Discourse Analysis as a relevant research approach; third, I will present the results of conducting Critical Discourse Analysis on a corpus consisting of the website presentation of 10 public and private universities (the University of Bucharest, the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, the “Petre Andrei” University of Iași, the “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, the “Transylvania” University of Brașov, the West University of Timișoara, “Babes Bolyai” University (Cluj-Napoca), the North University of Baia Mare, the “Petroleum and Gas” University of Ploiești and “Ovidius” University of Constanța), on three faculty and university prospectuses (the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia and the “Lower Danube” University of Galați) and one promotional CD, for the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. Finally, I will briefly compare the discourse of Romanian universities with the discourse of universities from the UK, France, Italy and Germany, and suggest lines for improvement.

The impact of EU integration on national education

Romania is the only country in the former communist block that developed economic relations with the European

Economic Community in the 1970's. It signed the European Agreement of Association in 1993, started negotiations in 2000, and hopes to become a member of the EU beginning with January 2007.

In the prospect of EU integration, Romania will have to ensure increased access to training, and the improvement of educational standards. Currently Romania applies the transferable credit system and various distance education programs have been developed to support the European principle of lifelong learning. A national program – CALISRO – has been set up to monitor the quality of higher education. In addition to this, education in the native language is granted to all minorities and a special attention has been given lately to the Roma community, to increase their literacy and participation in the educational process and civic life.

In the near future, the higher education cycles (undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs) will be structured on a scheme of 3/4(BA) – 2 (MA) – 3 (PhD) years, the Diploma supplement will be introduced by 2005, and joint degree integrated study programs will be developed. Also, University Trusts will be founded by 2010, to improve the use of resources, reduce costs, increase institutional collaboration, facilitate student and teacher mobility, organize common admission contests and set up excellence research centers.

Theoretical research framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

Language plays a more significant role in contemporary socio-economic changes than it did in the past. Therefore, discourse analysis has the potential to contribute extensively to the research of the transformations in current society.

One of the latest developments in the study of language is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA aims to explore the relations of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (Fairclough 1995: 133).

CDA draws on the shifting relations between discourse elements of different networks of social practices and the re-scaling of discourse practices. One relevant example is the way in which the language of management and marketing has colonized public institutional discourse, a phenomenon that Fairclough has called "marketization". Private sphere discursive practices have also colonized public orders of discourse, in the process that the same author has dubbed "conversationalization". As for re-scaling, one could consider the appropriation of the discourse of international and European Union institutions by national institutional discourse.

Also, another noteworthy development is the generalization of promotion as a communicative function (Fairclough 1995: 137-138), which entitles one to label contemporary culture as "promotional" or "consumer's" culture. The consequence of this phenomenon is the emergence of hybrid genres that incorporate promotional elements in the structure of traditional genres. On the other hand, discursive practices are increasingly instrumental, i.e. meaning is created and manipulated for instrumental effects.

In addition to this, the relationship between signifier, signified and referent is on the verge of bankruptcy, because two types of signification now coexist: signification-with-reference and signification-without-reference. If in the former case there is a real object to which the signified is conceptually connected, in the latter case the "object" only exists at the level of discourse. This rupture in signification bears, of course, serious ethical implications, due to the impossibility to distinguish signification-with-reference from signification-without-reference and genuine conversationalism from subtle manipulation.

Management principles in university discourse

Both lucrative organizations and public institutions acknowledge the vital role of communication not only for the success of their operations but also for their own survival. According to direction and goal, communication can be classified as *external operational*; *external promotional*; *internal operational* and *internal personal*.

The university external promotional communication is more visible, and therefore lends itself easier to be researched. This form of communication recontextualizes basic management principles that operate in the business world, by the inclusion of mission statements, goals and the organizational chart in university prospectuses and on web pages.

The mission statement and the goals, as text types, feature a typical characteristic of corporate discourse: the use of the so-called CBS style (clarity, brevity, sincerity) as the norm for professional communication (Scollon & Scollon 200: 106). Clarity, brevity and sincerity are indeed topical imperatives in the business world. However, in the Romanian discourse practices, brevity is not always the rule. This is why mission statements tend to be quite long and hard to follow.

Reports, operational and strategic plans were more numerous and sophisticated at the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004, when faculties and universities elected their managerial team for a 4-year mandate. What these documents reveal is that universities are run as businesses, and their public communication covers issues that businesses also make public to shareholders.

Recently, the “Ovidius” University of Constanța developed a “Quality Manual” – a pioneering endeavor in Romania that reveals the University’s status as a service provider, its concern for Total Quality Management and its ambition to monitor the teaching process and its deliverables.

Intertextuality in university discourse

Quality has been one of the key words in the higher education institutions in Western Europe since the 1980’s-1990’s. In Romania, this preoccupation has come more to the fore with the validation of the Education Law in 1995, and it became institutionalized with the creation of the National Council for Quality Management in Higher Education in 1998.

In 1999 Romania signed the Bologna Declaration, expressing its commitment to establishing a European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education. The advertising discourse of Romanian universities has internalized the need to adjust to European standards, being thus colonized by the EU educational discourse.

University public forms of communication list objectives such as “to assimilate Western standards for academic education, as a basis in the formation of professionals capable to respond to the challenge of European integration and globalization of world economy, to participate in inter-university cooperation, both inside and outside Romania, to

adjust the curriculum to European standards, to promote a coherent policy at university level in the field of lifelong learning and adult education. These objectives obviously echo the directives of the Ministry and of the European institutions, as laid down in the Bologna Declaration, and they have been unchallengingly appropriated in the local discourse.

At another level, the university discourse intertextualizes the discourse of transition, with its recurrent use of the comparison between the Communist past (before 1989) and the democratic present (after 1989), of key words such as change, transformation and reform, and of their synonyms. To give just two examples, the University of Cluj marks the year 1989 as a milestone that brought about the University’s re-entry in the circle of prestigious European research and education institutions, and for Transylvania University of Brașov, 1989 was the beginning of its “redimensioning”.

In addition to this, echoes of the communist past resonate in the feeling of pride of belonging to an institution. Loyalty and pride of affiliation are elements of Western corporate culture. Yet, in Romania, the pride of belonging still reminds us of what we were supposed to feel towards the Communist Party. Sometimes one even has the impression that the new discourse has replaced the “wooden language” of communist propaganda by another “wooden language” of reform and European integration, equally rigid and standardized.

The self-promotional discourse of some universities boasts, quite unrealistically, about assets and facilities in a tone that echoes the record crops and industrial output reported under the communists. The rhetoric of the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, listing facilities that in reality do not match the labels used to describe them, is a good case in point. There is, therefore, a clash between the projected image and the empirical evidence.

Institutional identity

One of the roles of the external promotional communication is to create a sense of identity. Guillaume Soenen and Bertrand Moingeon, in the article "The Five Facets of Collective Identities: Integrating Corporate and Organizational Identity" (Moingeon & Soenen 2002: 13-34), distinguish between the *professed*, the *projected*, the *experienced*, the *manifested* and the *attributed* identity.

The *professed* identity is a self-attributed identity, the statements used by organizational members to define their collective identity. When the professed identity is communicated to the others, it becomes the *projected* identity, consisting of communications, behaviors or symbols. The *experienced* identity is the collective representation of the organization, achieved by its members, as collective cognitive maps, unconscious structures or beliefs. The *manifested* identity is the organization's historical identity, visible in its routines, structure, performance level, market positioning and symbolic manifestations. Last but not least, the *attributed* identity refers to what is known as corporate image – the attributes ascribed to an organization by its audiences.

The projected identity of most universities in the corpus is impersonal, distant, settled, and conservative. Contrary to this tendency, the message of the Rector of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University strikes a surprising and stylistically pleasant difference: it has an inviting tone and is formulated as a dialogue between "we" (the University) and "you" (potential students). The institution, therefore, is personalized and featured as a hospitable entity, eager to share knowledge and to benefit from students' experience and personal qualities, in a win-win partnership. What is more, its identity is constructed as a narrative, as can be seen in the fragment below:

The "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University is a university that has its own character. It has that kind of pride that makes her different: sober, yet inventive, solid, yet ready to face challenges at any time. Pioneering work is the characteristic feature of this university. In the University of Iași people talk among themselves: researchers from various fields cooperate and have internationally recognized achievements. Both teaching staff and students are engaged in the process of renewal; the university and the commercial sector are in close contact. In addition to this, Iași is a city of a particularly pleasant patriarchal atmosphere, which attracts students like a magnet. Students are those who lend an air of youth to the university and to the city. The "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University is a classical university that will know how to face the challenges of the future." (Author's translation of text in Romanian available at <http://www.uaic.ro/default.php?t=site&pgid=2>¹)

The conversationalization of university discourse is a matter of individual choice and personal style. However, I have noticed that there is also a link between the profile of the issuing institution and the type of discourse it projects of itself. Business schools are more prone to adopt self-promotional marketing strategy in their discourse, and they opt for a dialogic discourse that establishes a customer-service provider relationship with prospective students.

In another line of thought, in my view, there are instances of clashes between the *projected identity* (the result of "texts" directed outside the institution) and the *experienced identity* (affected mostly by deficient internal communication).

¹ All websites referred to in this article were accessed in the spring of 2004.

Whereas the projected identity insists upon the notion of quality and high educational standards, the insider's view of the teaching activity is not so optimistic. The claims about teaching quality are hardly realistic if we consider the large number of students in a group, the course schedule overlapping, the inadequate learning facilities and the excessive teaching loads.

The desire to attract funds from tuition-paying students, to supplement governmental funds, is likely to lead to trade-offs of quality and performance. However, it is hoped that this is just a temporary state, and that the projected image will, eventually, become effective. After all, the educational system *is* in a process of reformation, and progress depends on steady actions and dedication to improve the *status quo*. What is needed most is transformational leaders and committed followers, who should be aware of the university's social mission and eager to face the challenge of fighting stereotypical thinking and resistance to transformation.

The impact of national culture on university discourse

Quality in universities is assessed in terms of academic reputation, career opportunities, program flexibility, duration to complete a degree and cost of education (Mazzarol 2001: 104). In my corpus, nevertheless, the notion of quality is associated with tradition and the institution's history.

The promotional CD of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University starts with a historical survey that goes beyond the foundation year (1860) to dwell upon the beginning of high education in Moldavia (the historical province situated in the east) in the 17th century. The University of Baia Mare, founded in

1991, takes an even longer journey into the past, to the year 1388, when there was a school in the area.

Nevertheless, this foundation of quality on long history is not necessarily valid. The "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași is, indeed, the oldest university in Romania, and the University of Bucharest is the second, but neither is in the top 100 European universities, nor at least in the top 500 world universities.

The preference to support the idea of quality in the historical past can be accounted for if we consider the Romanian cultural orientation towards the past and tradition rather than towards the future. This preference is equally evinced by the resurfacing of the cult of the dead in the message of the rectors of the "Petre Andrei" and "Transylvania" Universities.

There are, however, signs that attitudes are slightly changing. The web presentation of the West University of Timișoara (in the westernmost part of the country) has a brief historical survey and it defines quality by invoking the good results obtained by the staff upon passing employment selection exams, the numerous prizes that they were awarded, and EU evaluation. Similarly, the website presentation of the "Babes Bolyai" University introduces it as a modern institution that can stand on equal footing with European and American universities given its 1,500 experienced faculty staff and 40,000 students.

Another Romanian cultural factor that influences the discourse of universities is low uncertainty avoidance. Universities display a marked concern to outline the legal framework in which they function as institutions. They invariably mention the official documents issued by the Government and/or other national bodies or the University Senate, and that have a bearing on their functioning, both in the Romanian version and in the English translation, although this information is obviously irrelevant to the international audience.