

Article

Defining people: Analysing power, language and representation in metaphors of the New South Africa

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Ultimately, the political usefulness of discourse analysis to political activists may be in its potential to go beneath the surface, to disrupt what may be seen as taken for granted and natural, to reveal contradictions and to show connections between that which may seem distinct. – De la Rey 1997:196

Introduction

The South African political landscape has undergone momentous transformation in the last decade. In the early nineties, at the dusk of apartheid, negotiations facilitated the birth of the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), the certainty of democratic elections and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). More than seven years have passed since the onset of a democratic order in South Africa. The new dispensation came to symbolise possibilities, beginnings and ushered in forms of liberation.

This site of affirmation, where speaking begins and silencing ends, exists also as a position defined by contradiction. 'New' South Africans are exposed to the reality of this location since the meanings and expressions of this identity are contested, questioned and constantly being re-fashioned. This paper analyses the dominant ways in which South Africans are defined/define ourselves through a stress on national unity, investigates the different accents placed on the vocabulary used to construct and reinforce ideas about the new nation, and scrutinises the languages through which these processes are achieved. I choose to access this space partly through an examination of metaphors that have become foregrounded in the South

African imaginary, analysing some of the implications for power ushered in by these definitions.

There are multiple entry points into a discussion of the discourses which feed into new-South-Africanese. As a locality characterised by heterogeneity, South Africanness depends on the continuation of other identities because 'we are never only South Africans' (Erasmus 1996). Stuart Hall (1996) suggests that identity is never complete but is defined, inscribed and accessible in language. Several other scholars have argued convincingly for the relationship between language and identity. Annemarié van Niekerk (1998) has noted the manner in which systems of dominance inscribe themselves primarily through language. Thus, engagement with identity requires several practices of formation where systems of power are constructed, resisted, subverted and mediated in and through linguistic agency (Kadalié 1995, Mbembe 2000, Wicomb 1998). These processes of resistance and subversion are not altogether free of the anxieties of the systems of dominance which they reject. It is necessary to recognise that,

[t]reating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is [...] to refuse a separation between 'experience' and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse [...] Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it does not happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning (Joan Scott in Sawhney 1996:8).

Although a free South Africa is unencumbered by many of the manifestations of apartheid, apartheid language continues to determine the manner in which we speak against its discursive construction. The language of apartheid definition and control had always been challenged by the liberation movements so that, in South Africa, at least, the parameters of language have always been contested terrain. The Black Consciousness Movement, for instance, recognised instantly that apartheid was predicated on division and the enforced legitimisation of these disunities through language. Rejecting apartheid division and naming, it deconstructed 'non-white' identities and reclaimed 'black' as a racial signifier which united all those cordoned off into bantustans or labelled 'Coloured' and Indian. The signifier and identity 'black' became an affirmation of pride and opened up possibilities of unity among the racially oppressed. In different vein, the non-racist politics of the African National Congress, the Communist Party (later SACP) and Unity Movement sought to challenge apartheid logic. Whereas the mechanisms of the apartheid state were used extensively to enforce separation between the 'races', these organisations destabilised the

basis of apartheid logic. Apartheid did not initiate the divide-and-rule *modus operandi* but inherited it from a colonial administration. However, separation was central to the naming of the previous government's policies.

In a democratic South Africa naming remains dynamic; reclamation and redefinition present new possibilities as evidenced, for example, by the shifting contemporary uses of 'c/Coloured' and 'b/Black' (Kadalie 1995, Wicomb 1998). Having resisted abrasive representation for several decades, new ways of describing, prescribing and defining have come to the fore. Notwithstanding the new spirit of openness and a dispensation which is enabling, it would be naïve to assume that discourses of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism crucial to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy would disappear overnight.

Alternative discourses emerged and grew in visibility in the newly liberated space. They participated in the 'undoing' of apartheid and in challenging its most insidious lies. These discourses contribute to the creation of new realities, new 'truths'. Their public rehearsal ensures they capture the nation's imagination and are gradually accepted as 'truth'. The new truths in South Africa reinforce and legitimise unity as a mastertext in the definition of the parameters through which South Africanness can be inhabited as an identity. Various discourses evident in the public domain in contemporary South Africa all confirm the centrality of unity to the identity 'South African'. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the rainbow nation trope, and the 'Africanisation' of language and humour will be examined to 'explore how acts of power are performed, and the conditions which allow these acts to work' (Burman et al 1997: 2) as the most visible sites for the rehearsal of authorised truths in the post-apartheid dispensation.

The TRC and the language of memory

The TRC, heralded as a site of affirmation where speaking begins and silencing ends, exists also as a position defined by contradiction. Much has been written on how this organ sought to make sense of a brutal past by publicly rehearsing the formation of memory (Asmal, Asmal and Roberts 1996, Baderoon 1997, Gqola 2000, Krog 1998, Liebenberg and Zegeye 1998, Motsemme and Ratele forthcoming, Prins forthcoming, Soyinka 1999). TRC reports were a constant reminder that much still needs to change, for, as Jo-Anne Prins (2000:2) has asserted, 'with the introduction of democracy and a constitution based on human rights, racism has taken on more subtle forms'. Whether we listened to the live radio broadcasts of

the TRC hearings, or simply watched the hour-long report on Sunday evenings, apartheid brutality was foremost in the psyche of the country's peoples.

However, even the responses to what the TRC has uncovered were seen to be largely determined by race. Antjie Krog, who reported extensively on TRC proceedings, notes with some surprise that,

for the first time these individual truths sound unhindered in the ears of *all* South Africans. The black people in the audience are seldom upset. They have known the truth for years. The whites are often disconcerted: they didn't realise the magnitude of the outrage, the 'depth of depravity' as Tutu calls it. (1998: 45; emphasis added)

That the TRC served a much-needed purpose in many instances is not to say that there have not been shortcomings. Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies concluded their submission to the TRC thus:

This submission highlights many facets to the pain and suffering that violence in South Africa caused to women and men in particular ways. It also focuses on the violence and inequality which are an ongoing part of women's lives in this country. These abuses are still occurring although within an altered political context. By raising these issues within the TRC process we cannot simply put them behind us and assume that abuse of women has been neatly dealt with in our past and reconciliation has occurred. Examining the conditions which allow women to be harmed and violated should focus all our attentions on the need to eradicate this ongoing abuse. If the TRC is to leave a valuable legacy it must lift the veil of silence hanging over the suffering of women and must incorporate the struggle to end this suffering in the struggle for human rights in our country. (Goldblatt and Meintjies 1996:55)

It is therefore naive to imagine that having revealed some truths, the South Africa populace would then be able to move ahead embracing new ways of relating to one another. Rather, the task of 'reconciliation' is more ambitious than it is often framed to be. It often leads to the denial of responsibility and the assumption that revelation itself is an antidote to the country's problems. The TRC is neither wholly responsible for this perception nor entirely blameless. In its naming there is implied as truth precisely that which is not always achievable: that confession leads to absolution and reconciliation. However, not only did the suitability of the Christian motif of confession remain unexamined within the confines of the TRC,¹ the commission also glossed over the specificities of the confessional. Confession has its conditions, and it implies a relatively recent rupture between the parties

concerned. The implied temporary rift lends greater credibility and believability to reconciliation. This harmonising trope was further reinforced by its proximity to 'truth' in the title of the commission.

If, as Susan H Williams (1999:20) argues, ideas about 'truth' are most useful when perceived as part of a shared reality which is connected to collective and democratic participation, '[t]ruth can form the basis for an understanding of oneself as connected to reality in a stable way, so that reality is not set adrift or up for grabs, but anchored'.

To reconcile is to become friendly *again* after an estrangement. It should not be surprising perhaps that the commission charged with the repository of a nation's memory should partake in more than collecting. Indeed, as Homi K Bhabha (1993:121) has argued,

Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

The project of memory-making is not one of retrieval. Rather, it is constructed through language subject to processes of reduction, distortion and selection 'to sanction the interpretation to which it is meant to contribute' (White 1978:107). The preservation of memory is therefore selective and implicated in power. When the 'truth' of 'reconciliation' is privileged, 'other possibilities about the same past ... get repressed, transformed, marginalised, forgotten or silenced' (Motsemme and Ratele 2000:2). Consequently, in the proceedings and operations of the TRC there are conflicting and competing discourses on 'truth' and 'reconciliation'.

Languages of the rainbow nation

When Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu first spoke of us as the rainbow children of God, he did not appear to deny difference. The analogy foregrounded his belief in the ability of all South Africans to co-exist in spite of and because of difference. In the democratic dispensation, this was a possibility for the first time. However, as this label was thrust into the mainstream discourse of new South Africanese, it took a somewhat less progressive turn. Rainbowism became an authorising narrative which assisted in the denial of difference. By rainbowism I mean the intertwined and competing processes through which:

- a) the label 'rainbow nation' grew synonymous with 'South Africa';
- b) the invocation of the collective 'rainbow nation' stifles rigorous discussions of power differentials;

c) the inherent contradiction contained in a label which superficially emphasises difference but prevents its discussion is enabled.

Rainbows foreground a blurred set of differences since their boundaries are fluid. The range of colours and these ambiguities are essential to their constitution. The most pervasively evoked definition for South Africans presently, rainbowism foregrounds racial variety even as it does not constructively deal with the meanings thereof. Race is highlighted for its own sake and the overlay remains unexplored. This has the problematic effect of fixing identities since identity is 'always in process' and influenced by 'realignment of intra-affiliations between ethnicity, class and gender, as well as perspectival shunting between self and other' (Wicomb 1998:367). Racial spaces are neither seamless nor uncontested. Kopano Ratele (1997:61) suggests that, 'attempts to open up negotiations of identity [...] are urgent but also exciting, and possibly freeing'. He recognises that this can only happen amid discussion and 'negotiation' of the meanings of racial identity: Debate is the antithesis of the prevalent silences around race articulation in the new South Africa. These silences are made possible by the overwhelming definition of South Africans as the rainbow nation.

Archbishop Tutu invoked the metaphor for its symbolic value. The diversity he referred to can be extended to engulf variety according to gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, geographical location, education and class in the spirit of the South African constitution, which recognises and respects these diversities. The analogy emphasises the ability to co-exist peacefully since,

[o]ne of the single most unifying symbols of the unfolding South Africa ... is the insertion of the 'reconciliation text', as embodied in the 'rainbow nation' rhetoric ... Yet for the 'rainbow vision' to become visible, gain ascendancy and greater legitimacy it must be performed over and again, flagged through a range of linguistic and visual signs. (Motsemme and Ratele 2000:4)

However, the rainbow is also a reflection, a spectacular visual illusion. Within the boundaries of rainbowism there exist a series of possibilities that (potentially) rupture the ideal. Rainbows are a fantasy, yet they remain symbolic and constitutive of the new 'truths' in a democratic South Africa.

Rainbows appear 'mysteriously', they are not dependent on human labour. They are transitory, fleeting and perpetually out of reach. Echoing Erasmus's (1996) declaration that 'we are never only South Africans', Archbishop Tutu's analogy suggests that we are not always part of the

rainbow, for the fragments of the rainbow are always in the atmosphere in other manifestations. Instead rainbowism is evoked at specific points where a certain kind of non-racialism, though not necessarily anti-racism, needs to be stressed. We are not always rainbow people, only some of the time when the need arises.

Belonging to the rainbow implies that the members of the rainbow have equal access to the mythic pot of gold, wealth. It elucidates the significance of the rainbow motif as a commentary on access to resources and wealth. But even here the process of definition is slippery for even in a democratic South Africa social stratification makes nonsense of the argument that we all have access to (economic) resources. Occluded is the common knowledge that gold is dug up (mainly) by black male mineworkers from the belly of the earth, who remain poor because they have no power within capitalism to own the product of their labour, or indeed even their labour itself. There is no mention of their labour when we mythologise about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Here rainbowism seems to work to demonstrate the manner in which all South Africans have equal access to resources. The falsity of that claim is self-evident. South African identity is fluid, taking on its rainbow configuration when desired, and an unspecified 'other' when non-essential. While rainbowism serves to reinforce notions of a united nation, it also contains suggestions that undermine this motif. Its stress on a precarious unity is based on the erasure of difference and the minimising of the continuing effects of power differentials on members of the South African body politic. The rainbow is the prosperity after the rain, the reward flowing from the discord. It suggests that the struggle is over and little work remains to be done.

The metaphor of the rainbow people is hailed as a celebration of unity and the successes of a post-apartheid dispensation. Yet its benefits continue to elude, slip and mock. It rejects transparency and its constitutive meanings constantly undercut each other. It foregrounds difference at precisely the moment during which it trivialises its implications. Thus, an interrogation of its connotations yields no definitive answers. It simultaneously leads everywhere and nowhere, is helpful and dangerous because even as it asserts its presence, it signifies absence.

It is often accompanied in its public rehearsal by the assertion of unity through various media which range from the use of sport, specifically rugby, cricket and, to a lesser extent, soccer, as evidence of the unity of the

citizens of the country. Mixed audiences are co-opted as the spectacle which authorises rainbowism. Spectatorship is paraded as the expression of this unity.

Another arena which avails itself to the service of rainbowism in similar ways is the television channel SABC1. Television presents the viewing public with mixed messages on the constitution of South Africanness. All channels were revamped and relaunched as appropriate for a new South African dispensation shortly after the first election. SABC1 proudly announced, 'Simunye, We Are One', then 'Simunye – One Time'.² This self-conscious performance of the united young nation is broadcast as part of the trendy, designer-clad, Mandoza-mesmerised terrain of youth culture.

Defining People

Two examples serve as an illustration of how the rainbow nation motif works to erase difference: a reference each to humour and sport. I recently heard the comedian Barry Hilton tell a joke about how remembering some things was as difficult as remembering past the first five lines of the national anthem, for what he referred to as 'most of us' (Hilton 2001). 'Most of us' in this instance was used to the majority of those who would have occasion to sing it with some regularity, in other words, South Africans. This generated the usual laughter that anything from Hilton's mouth seems to spawn in some quarters. Hilton's comment, although presented as reflective of general South African experience, dominant South African experience by numbers was, of course, not what it was paraded as. What Hilton demonstrated here, and what has become quite familiar to many South African audiences of popular culture, is what Adrienne Rich named 'white solipsism', which refers to the tendency to 'think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world'. While white solipsism describes a practice which serves racism by omission, it is 'not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness'.

This solipsism, present in jokes like those of Hilton, features in various other guises in the new South Africa and goes predominantly unchallenged. It contributes to the general and ironic invisibility of black South African experiences in public culture so that it is possible to note in most National

Standards Authority advertisements that there are always fewer black faces than white; that it is possible to simply apply policy on representation imported wholesale from elsewhere – usually North America and western Europe where people of colour are a ‘minority’. Fewer still adverts in the media targeted across the racial spectrum are predicated on or reflective of the diversity of black experiential locations.

Similarly, in sport, when the Springboks resisted a name change, a compromise was reached. They were simply ‘renamed’ *amabokoboko*, which kept the name in its plural form but added the illusion of Africanisation. This did not meet with much resistance from many. The ‘new’ name was familiar: the meaning had not changed and was fashioned after and imitative of what Orlando Pirates have been known as for many years to black South Africans: *amabakabaka* (The Buccaneers). While this transition was relatively smooth, it introduced the proliferation of the prefix ‘ama’ to various words in English and mainstream Afrikaans. So it becomes possible to read a sign in a Bloemfontein mall (Westdene Arcade) which reads ‘amabiltong-biltong’ or for Wimpy to have a special offer on ‘amaburger-burger’. This pseudo-Africanisation of places, commodities, etc is emblematic of a tokenistic relationship between new-South-Africanese and the concept, idea and politics of Africa generally. It is reflective of the opportunistic links made conveniently with Africa, which do not seem, paradoxically however, to encourage a critical reflexiveness or reveal the ironies of xenophobia even as many headlines scream ‘African Renaissance’. It is the same set of attitudes which makes it possible for the signifier ‘African’ to mean both the people of, related to the continent, and, more likely, the products made from recycled cans in South Africa: *Afri-can*.

Thus it becomes possible for naming to have great significance and at the same time give the appearance of arbitrary usage. These examples and others contribute to what has become ‘true’, recognisable as ‘real’, in South Africa and they challenge us to be mindful of Cheryl de la Rey’s assertion that,

acts of renaming, reclaiming and gaining voice are politically crucial for the benign appearance of oppressive practices is deceptive. It requires appropriate naming so that we can engage its specific historical forms and practices of domination of the ways in which this specificity intersects with other forms of oppression. (1997:8-9)

The sway of harmony

What ends do these claims to political collectivity serve? The illusion of

unity and equanimity enable the unself-reflexive embrace of rainbowism and 'reconciliation' as key to the expression of a new South African ideal. The stress on unity echoes similar tendencies in other discourses of nationalism in South Africa and elsewhere, which run contrary to the centrality of division in apartheid and colonial discourse. While the emphasis succeeds as antidote to colonialist ways of definition, it also threatens rigorous examination of our entanglements in difference and power.

It becomes possible thus, hiding under rainbowism, to dismiss the effects of history on the contemporary, the need for affirmative action, and for black and/or women empowerment initiatives. It reinforces the illusion of pervasive equality and negates the need for equity endeavours to rectify the effects of the interlocking systems of apartheid, patriarchy and capitalism among others. Thus, oppressive practices can comfortably be equated and conflated with the endeavours designed to correct them. Christine Qunta expresses it thus,

One of the more disturbing trends in the last few years has been the use of the racism label by whites against Africans who speak out against the manifestation of white racism. It is in effect a trivialisation of something that has been, and continues to be, very painful for black people. If one is to be cynical, it may be an attempt to silence those voices likely to disturb the status quo. What we end up with then are just shouts of racism from both sides of the fence. It is the appropriation of a term and using it in such a way that it becomes ineffective to convey a particular idea. It renders it harmless. (1998: 61-4)

Thus, not only does rainbowism hide race difference, it reduces it to a non-entity, so that ultimately white supremacy, which drove apartheid and remains reflected in institutional racism, albeit not state-sponsored, becomes a phenomenon that is whitewashed of all meaning. Further, whiteness is not seen as a racialised identity which needs deconstruction because white people are not racialised in the same way as black people. When viewed as an issue, 'race' becomes a problem for the latter not the former.

Rainbowism permits the farce of sameness and colour-blindness by erasing historical significance and the accompanying power dynamics which continue to influence the present. The focus shifts from the share of power in South Africa to constructed and elusive unities supported by the 'reconfiguration of power and culture [so the performance of inequality] is retold in the past tense, as a mythology whose archaic logic and effects are no longer with us' (Kaul 1996:80), as in the labelling of all black South

Africans as 'previously disadvantaged'. This new classification insinuates that all the injustices of yesteryear have been completely done away with. Since racism was a significant part of the past, this new label implies that racism is gone. If performed frequently enough, it assumes the status of fact and is relegated to the realm of 'truth'. In other words, it becomes our truth.

Lizeka Mda (1996) points to the silencing manoeuvres directed at those who dare to question the construction of the new South Africa. In the same article she argues that the 'culture' of reconciliation 'cons' black South Africans of any real public justified platform to address history. Instead, the moralistic language of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) leads to the sanctioning of only one way of examining racism and inequity. Thus, Mda echoes Wicomb in lamenting that '[o]ne of the more refreshing qualities of apartheid was the abandon with which we all talked about and talked of ourselves in terms of race' (Wicomb 1998:363). This racial self-consciousness could not collude to mask whiteness as a category.

For Qunta (1998), public discourse has appropriated and trivialised the languages of anti-racism necessary for the creation of an equitable society. Instead, those who identify and critique white supremacist practice are faced with counter-accusations of racism. AC Fick (1999:1) cautions against a reading that places the problematic with 'the ideas and ideologies of individual[s]' and suggests one which recognises that these lie 'with the ideologies and practices of the institutions which they inhabit, and the discourses which shape these individuals and institutions'. These political discursive processes partake in how meaning is constituted and contribute to the interpretations ascribed to the lives of South Africans.

It is therefore important to listen to and between these narratives, as well as pay attention to the larger narratives of which they are part, that we may be able to hear the conversations, the ruptures and overlaps which exist in the mythologising of the new South Africa. This should be accompanied by a rigorous interrogation of systems which naturalise the pervasive denial of difference.

Far from attempting to define or set up a new set of steadfast categories, this paper has pointed to the existence of fissures and gaps in the ways which South Africans define ourselves/one another. It has also perhaps brought the discussion to the point on which I started. The identity 'new South African' is then one that is necessarily contradictory, in flux and analytical. The languages/words we use to describe provide perhaps an insight into the repressed uncertainties of our South African psyche(s).

Notes

1. Motsemme and Ratele (2000) ask why the Christian motif should be privileged in a country of many religions, and where Christianity occupies a problematic position given the justification of apartheid by the NG Kerk on the one hand, and the vociferous anti-apartheid activism which was characteristic of other parts of the Christian religion in apartheid SA. Furthermore, they point to the range of alternative systems available to inform the TRC text.
2. SABC2 declared 'Made in Africa' then and now 'Come Alive with Us'; while SABC3 has proclaimed 'Quality Shows' and 'We're Simply The Best'.

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