Promotional discourse at internationalised universities: A critical discourse analysis approach

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XXXV AESLA Conference
University of Jaén (Spain)
4-6 May 2017
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Introduction

Norman Fairclough (1993):

“marketization” of university discourse

Market-oriented institutional discourse

use of corporate-related terms like “corporate identity”, “strategic plans” or “customers/clients”

Introduction

International v. Internationalised

- **Internationalised** → “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (European Parliament, 2015: 29)

- **Internationalised universities** → universities that place internationalisation high on their agenda.
Research questions

Research question 1

• What are the key topics or recurrent themes that internationalised universities bring to the fore to project an image of themselves and establish their institutional identity?

Research question 2

• What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?
Data collection and analysis

• Ten prestigious European universities (Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, edition 2017.1.1 Jan 2017)

  University of Edinburgh (GB)  Lund University (SE)
  VU Amsterdam University (NL)  Aarhus University (DK)
  University of Oslo (NO)  University of Bologna (IT)
  Heidelberg University (DE)  University of Zurich (CH)
  University of Helsinki (FI)  University of Granada (ES)

• “Why study at…?” / “Why choose…?” subsections of university websites (main sections = study / international).
Data collection and analysis

• Critical Discourse Analysis Approach (Fairclough, 1993)
• Qualitative text analysis of university websites.

- Texts were scanned for key topics and recurrent themes
- Main themes were explored and organised
- Further examination for promotional language traits
Research question 1: What are the key topics or recurrent themes that internationalised universities bring to the fore to project an image of themselves and establish their institutional identity?

Findings and discussion

*Education*
- degrees & PhDs;
- teaching staff of int. repute;
- study grants;
- tuition fees;
- personal supervision;
- career services;
- etc

*Research*
- innovation;
- staff = top researchers;
- range of researching areas;
- research achievements with an int. impact;
- centres & campuses of excellence;
- etc

*Internationality*
- activities against and int. background (e.g. int. cooperation projects, EMI);
- opportunities offered to students (e.g. mobility programmes);
- services of an int. scope (e.g. int. relations office)

*Prestige*
- world rankings;
- age and tradition;
- recognised quality;
- awards received

*Social life*
- countries & cities;
- age and tradition;
- recognised quality;
- awards received

*Singularity (USPs)*
- study programmes;
- quality of staff;
- investment for the future (e.g. employability, startups);
- social responsibility (e.g. fair-trade, healthy food);
- sustainability (e.g. renewable energies, green campus)
Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

1. Proximity and familiarity

• Personal pronouns
• Instances of conversation-like language
• Testimonials
• Word play (puns, idioms, sayings, puns, catchy phrases, slogans, alliteration and metaphorical language)
Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

Findings and discussion

1. Proximity and familiarity: examples

[EX1] ... the main library in Kaisaniemi with its comfy couches and armchairs is frankly so appealing to the students that some even camp outside to get the best places to study! Haha, well, maybe we are exaggerating just a teeny tiny bit. (...) Are you a foodie, an art lover, a movie freak or into music? Whatever it is that your heart desires, Helsinki has got you covered! [Helsinki]

[EX2] Because it is the oldest and the newest university [Bologna]
Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

Findings and discussion

2. Commitment and trustworthiness

- Figures (data)
- First-person pronouns
- Performative verbs
- Future tense
Findings and discussion
Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

2. Commitment and trustworthiness: example

[EX3] We’re ranked 13th in the world’s most international universities. Students from two-thirds of the world’s countries study here. Six months after graduating, 94 per cent of our students are in employment or postgraduate study. We offer more than 1,000 international opportunities worldwide. [Edinburgh]

[EX4] We promise it’s going to be something amazing! [Helsinki]

[EX5] As a VU Amsterdam student, you will have a wide range of facilities at your disposal. You will have access to an extensive library. [Amsterdam]
Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

3. Appeal and attention

• Adjectives and adverbial phrases
• Comparatives and superlatives
• Imperatives
• Questions
• Implicatures
• Repetition and parallelism
Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

3. Appeal and attention: examples

[EX6] Denmark is widely cited as one of the world’s most liveable places. It has the world’s highest level of income equality according to the OECD. Based on the Corruption Transparency Index, Denmark is the least corrupted country in the world. [Aarhus]

[EX7] And after graduation? There are lots of opportunities to specialise and come into contact with the world of work. [Bologna]

[EX8] A university among the international elite [Aarhus]
Concluding remarks

• Internationalised universities exploit six themes to project an image of themselves and establish their institutional identity (e.g. Edinburgh v Oslo & Helsinki).

• “The ‘product’ on offer is not simply (or perhaps not at all) courses and study programmes – but all the ‘extras’ – that is, an exciting experience coupled with a friendly atmosphere, beautiful surroundings, and campus (support) facilities” (Askehave, 2007: 739)
Concluding remarks

• Internationalised universities employ three broad discursive strategies so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment.

• Such strategies exhibit linguistic traits that resemble those featuring in advertising: they are persuasive devices, they may appeal to feelings and are aimed at arising readers’ impulse to sign up (that is, to “buy the service” that is offered).

• As a consequence, promotional discursive traits have gradually permeated institutional discourse and redefined this genre to become more persuasive, promotional and marketing-oriented.
This work is a contribution to national research project FFI2015-68638-R MINECO/FEDER, EU, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.