

Saps-Speak: The language of the South African police in the post-apartheid era

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This article analyses a corpus of internal documents of the South African Police Service (SAPS) in the years after the end of the Apartheid regime (1997-2012) in order to offer an insight into the culture of the organisation through linguistic evidence. The linguistic evidence is operationalised in: choice of language used (SA has 11 official languages), genre characteristics and genre integrity (Bhatia, 2015; Bhatia, 2008; Fairclough, 2003; Leeuwen, 1993; Martin & Rose, 2003) intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1986; Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Voloshinov, 1973) and its meaning for the representation of voices in the corpus and, finally ideational metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The corpus has been tagged and studied through the UAM corpus tool (O'Donnell, 2012), which allows quantitative as well as qualitative analysis according to systemic-functional grammar. The linguistic findings are interpreted according to the different trends in political science and anthropology on the issue of police operations in the neo-liberal context.

Keywords: Discourse Studies; Genre Studies; Professional Practices; Public Order Policing; South Africa

1. Introduction

The study of the discourse of the police forces in the anglophone societies has been undertaken mainly by two traditions in linguistics: that of Conversation Analysis, interested in the interaction between speakers from a pragmatic point of view and the power relations between speakers, and that of Critical Discourse Analysis. In both cases, the types of text identified and subjected to analysis are necessarily public or publishable. This is why many studies have focused on police interviews records.

A first study in this tradition is the one authored by Malcolm Coulthard (1996), who can be identified as the initiator of the field of forensic linguistics in the anglophone tradition, and its updated version of 2002 (Coulthard, 2002). More recently, contributions were offered by Bucholtz (2009) and Haworth (2012). The reasons for this over-representation of the textual genre of interviews are both of a scientific nature - the interest of researchers in the

investigation of power relations between interviewers and interviewees - and of practical opportunities, given that interrogators are often re-contextualized as much in court proceedings and, often, in journalistic reports, and are therefore easy to access.

To find studies that shed some light into the professional practice and somehow behind the closed doors of the police quarters, it is necessary to refer to methodological approaches that do not have textual analysis as the centre of their interest (although they then use it for their analysis), such as sociology, anthropology and social psychology. It is from this disciplinary field that a first study focussing on some lexical aspects of the practice can be found. Frewin and Tuffin (1998) use in-depth interviews conducted by researchers with eight police officers in New Zealand. The study outlines three elements constituting the professional culture of the police force: the “status discourse”; the “conformist discourse” and the “discourse of internal pressure” (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998). The use of interviews with researchers has its limitations, as the awareness of being subject to observation cannot fail to influence the content of the information.

A first analysis that focusses on the investigative practices of internal police forces is that of Ericson and Haggerty in the volume *Policing the Risk Society* of 1997 (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). The researchers study police work as an internal information flow addressed to other institutional subjects that participate in the management of liberal democracies and identify textual genres specific to the professional practice in question. The conclusion they reach, namely that police work is now mainly done by creating and organizing information, forced into rigid models in which personal narratives disappear, is disputed by criminologist Elaine Campbell (2004). The analysis is of great interest for the study proposed here as it focusses precisely on the narrative notes, which, in the British context, accompany the recording of police interventions in a southern district of the country. With this study, we finally enter to observe professional and discursive practices functional to the performance of the duties of police forces and intended for internal circulation only. Nonetheless, Campbell’s work is limited to a small amount of text, as it is very difficult to access this kind of records, and does not operationalise concepts that are fundamental in discourse studies and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is the focus of the present study.

The study proposed here will, albeit partially, fill a gap identified above, namely that of the description of the language of a police force as used internally for the functioning of the professional community from the point of view of linguistics and ESP in particular.

The description obtained, also with the help of the grammatical categories of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), will contribute, through a critical

reading of the data, to outline the historical development of a discursive community in the making. In fact, as will be made clear in the background section below, the SAPS is a community created following historic-political changes of an epochal nature: the transition from a regime of racial segregation to one of inclusion and representativeness of the demographic structure of South Africa.

The historical period covered by the archives that are part of the corpus photographs 16 fundamental years for the creation of the new South African nation and offers an unprecedented look at this process, given the importance of the police forces for sustaining a liberal democracy, even at symbolic and identity level (Dixon, 2000; Frewin & Tuffin, 1998; Seferiades & Johnston, 2012; Springer, 2009).

An evaluation of the success of the police transformation process, from the point of view of specialised discourse, is a specific objective of the research. The aim is to identify in the discourse of the police forces those elements that could contribute to explaining the problems identified by scholars coming from different disciplinary traditions in the South African transition to democracy. This will contribute to the recognition of linguistics as a social science that can make a specific contribution to the study of social issues.

2. Background

South Africa's transition from the apartheid regime of racial segregation to full democracy is associated with the first democratic elections on April 27th, 1994. Twenty-five years after this historic date, it is increasingly evident that the first democratic elections cannot be interpreted as a point of arrival of a process, but rather as a first formal step towards the creation of that "rainbow nation" proposed by the first democratically elected president: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

At the date of the elections, indeed, the most important institutions of the country remained dominated by personnel of distant European origin, representative of the white minority that had colonized and dominated the country, the so-called "Afrikaners." The employees of the public administrations, the members of the army and—with the exception of the lowest ranks—the police forces were in fact Afrikaners.

In the years that followed the formal disintegration of the racist regime, the governments led by the African National Congress (ANC, a former national liberation movement that quickly became a ruling party) tried to transform the institutions of the State, especially through the recruitment of staff belonging to "formerly disadvantaged racial groups" at all levels of state administration. In the police, and in the armed forces.

The ANC governments, aware of the fundamental role of the police in the process of building the new nation, have devoted many of their efforts to the transformation of the police, starting with the change of its name: from South African Police (SAP), to South African Police Service (SAPS), as if to underline the change in its role from an instrumental force in the exercise of power and to the persecution of dissent (as it was in the years of Apartheid), to an institution at the service of the population.

If the declared goal was to create a police force geared towards serving the population and engaged in crime prevention, the last ten years of law enforcement would seem instead to signal an unexpected continuity with the practices and organizational culture of the past. The South African police, in fact, seem to continue in its function of repression of internal dissent – appropriately defined a real “Rebellion of the Poor” (Alexander, 2010) – with the same methods inherited from the old SAP (Dixon, 2000, 2015; Holdt & Alexander, 2012; Steinberg, 2011, 2014; Vally, 2003). The events of the summer of 2012 in the mining district of Marikana, during which the police killed 41 striking miners, are proof of this.

To clarify these episodes, the South African Research Chair in Social Change of the University of Johannesburg requested, and obtained, the archives of all SAPS interventions from 1997 to 2013 for the maintenance of public order, the Incident Registration Information System (IRIS)—an archive in which police interventions at public demonstrations, workers’ strikes and protests are recorded and described. In the archives, together with the objective information such as date, place and type of protest, there are “narrative” notes in which the events are described in more detail, and the actions taken by the representatives of the SAPS and, often, the reasons for the protest are reported.

3. Method

The full database counts 156, 230 “crowd incidents” (Alexander, Runciman & Maruping, 2016); 10% of these were considered “violent” (Alexander et al. 2015, 5). Among these, incidents that are labour-related are the most numerous (24% of the total) (Alexander, Runciman & Maruping, 2015). The notes that constitute the IRIS database, written partly in Afrikaans (the language of Afrikaners) partly in English, constitute the corpus (of about 800 thousand words) on which the research has been conducted. The analysis offered here concentrates on the labour related part, a corpus of 390,000 words.

The study starts from an ESP approach to genre studies (Swales, 1990). The formal characteristics of the textual genre under examination are identified in order to check its continuity (in consideration of the changes in the discursive

community determined by the terminations in service of the representatives of the 'old' SAP and the inclusion of new hires).

Furthermore, through the study of intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1986; Fairclough, 2003, Leech & Short, 2007), the "other" voices present or suppressed in the narrative that the police build for themselves are highlighted.

The sentence level study is conducted through the UAM Corpus Tool software (O'Donnell, 2012), which allows to perform an analysis of extended corpus according to the categories of SFG (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) through the creation of custom annotation schemes.

As to the procedure, first of all, a selection based on the motives of the protest was organised into broad categories. All the entries for which the motives were presented with the following five different labels: demand dismissal of employee; demand wage increases; dissatisfied with unemployment; dissatisfied with workers dismissal, and labour dispute, were unified under the label *labour related*.

Once this first selection was made, the notes section of the 2,678 incidents which fell into the category where extrapolated and transformed in .txt, so as to facilitate their tagging and analysis through the UAM Corpus Tool. Four annotation schemes, representing the system networks, were created for the analysis, and the corpus was consequently tagged to be searched for the labels specified below.

The first system network interrogates the corpus for type of departure, i.e. what in genre studies is normally called a "step", which was supposed to give us information on genre integrity. The labels in the scheme were the following: departure type1 (specifying the type of clause, if any at departure), where the system is made up of two choices: (a) date and time (thus, no clause), and (b) ideational element (thus the theme, in the textual metafunction, of a full clause. The second system in the system network was called Departure type 2, and it interrogates the corpus on the type of process represented in the first clause. The third system is called Participant on Departure and presents the choice among workers, employers, police or inanimate object as the active represented participant in the first clause.

The second system network looks at the types of clauses in the whole of the notes. Consequently, the first system presents the choice of processes according to the classical classification of material, mental, verbal, relational, existential, behavioural. The second system in the network is that of voice, passive or active, and the third is that of polarity, positive or negative.

The type of participants is the focus of the third system. In this case the systems were (a) active or passive, with subsystems corresponding to the

different participant roles for each of the processes listed above, (b) type of participant, either human (further specified in two subsystems: individual vs. collective and workers, employers, police, other) or non-human (further specified as object or organisation).

Finally, the fourth system network looks at the aspect of intertextuality, with a first system representing the choice between the absence and the presence of other voices in the text, and the second system specifying the type of representation according to the classification offered by Leech and Short (2007) of direct reporting, indirect reporting, free indirect reporting and narrative report of speech act. Other two systems in the same network offer the choice between individual or organisation and among the different interactive participants, namely workers, employers, the police or other.

4. Results

The survey of the language used has given interesting results. First of all, of the 11 official languages recognised by the South African Constitution only two are used in the corpus, namely English and Afrikaans. If we look at the historical development, we see that in the first year of the records (1997) the percentage of notes written in Afrikaans is 67% and it goes up in 1998 and 1999 getting at 73%. From 2000 on the percentage starts to drop and the number of reports written in English surpasses the ones in Afrikaans for the first time in 2003. The percentage of entries in Afrikaans remains around 25 percent in the years that follow, with a sudden drop in 2006, when only 5 percent of the reports are in Afrikaans and the remaining 95 percent is in English. In the same year, something surprising happens: a note starts in Afrikaans but ends in English. The following year a peculiar rebound of notes written in Afrikaans takes the percentage back to a two-digit value of 15 percent, but after that the decline becomes inexorable and gets to 0 percent in 2012, which is confirmed by the 2013 data.

The rest of the results offered here only refers to the reports written in English.

If we look at the data concerning the first stage and step in the hypothesized genre, the first aspect that strikes the eye is that in 1997 the percentage of notes starting with date and time, thus not with a full clause, is 96.55 percent. This is surprising because there is no need to repeat such information, as the database provides a dedicated column for it. This practice endures for the rest of the corpus, but if we look at the 2013 data, we see that there is a decline to 88.40 percent.

The first clause in each note is, for the main part, either material, thus a process of doing or happening as in (1) below, or verbal, thus a process of

saying as in (2):

- (1) On 97-11-14 At approx. 20:00 Capt. James and X section of POPU 18 *attended*¹ a complaint of striking/death threats.
- (2) On 97-02-23 At 15:00, On10 Capt. Ingle F/NO.0088298-4 *reported* that he attended a gathering at Cleremont Community Hall of +/-350 people.

(both quotations from the 1997 sub-corpus)

Verbal clauses prevail in the 1997 sub-corpus (51.72 percent as opposed to 46.80 percent in the 2013 sub-corpus), while material clauses prevail in the 2013 corpus (47.20 percent as opposed to 41.38 percent in 1997). The voice in the starting clause is active more than 90 percent of the times in both years and the active represented participants in the clauses are prevailingly the police itself, as also demonstrated by the examples given above. What can be considered as surprising is that the percentage of police participants as active participants grows through the years, from 79.31 percent in 1997 to 86.40 percent in 2013.

The types of processes for the whole English corpus show a different distribution. Indeed, the prevailing type is that of material processes (55.7 percent) followed by verbal processes (21.04 percent), while the processes that were nearly absent from the departure point are more widely used in the rest of the corpus, with relational processes, processes of being and becoming, as (3) below, amounting to 10,87 percent of the total, mental processes, processes of experiencing and sensing, as (4) below, at 8.75 percent, existential processes, as (5) below, at 2,36 percent and behavioural processes, a borderline category between material and mental processes, as in (6) below, at 1.18 percent. Most of the clauses have positive polarity, with negatives only amounting to 0.71 percent:

- (3) They *are* unhappy that Ntunjambili hospital are not offering employment at the hospital to the community of Kranskop.
(2005 sub-corpus)
- (4) At about 14:00 the police *saw* the smoke at the back of the company.
(2010 sub-corpus)
- (5) *There are* 120 SADTU members with 50 cars at the arena.
(2010 sub-corpus)
- (6) The protestors are *'toy-toying'*² in the main road.
(2013 sub-corpus)

The results extracted through the third system network will be described by looking at the single labels of type of participant, in order to focus the attention on the social actors involved in any labour related issue, namely workers and their organisations, the police and state organisations, employers and their organisations.

The data shows that workers and their organisations are active participants 69.59 percent of the times. In 40.94 percent of the cases they are active participants of material processes, as in (7), thus actors:

(7) “+- 30 *farm workers are barricading* the Nqubela rd with stones.
(2013 sub-corpus)

The second most frequent role as active participants for workers and their organisations is that of carrier (thus the active participant in a relational process, in which attributes are attached to the carrier, as in (3) above where the attribute is “unhappy”): this happens 11.7 percent of the times. In decreasing order, we then find workers as sayers, active participants in a verbal process, sensors, active participants of mental processes, existents and finally behaviors.

Even when passive participants, workers and their organisations are mostly involved in material processes, they are indeed goals 18.71 percent of the times:

(8) Metro members did a pushback and *dispersed the crowd* with the use of the water canon [sic].
(2012 sub-corpus)

This position is followed by that of receivers of verbal processes, attribute of relational processes, phenomenon of mental processes with 0 percent occurrences as verbiage of verbal processes.

The counterpart, employers and their organisations, shows a slightly different pattern. They are also mostly represented as active participants but with a lower percentage (66.67 percent) and this mostly happens in material processes (they are actors 58.78 percent of the times, as in example (9) below. The second most frequent type of clause in which they are active participants is a verbal one, in which they are represented as sayers, followed by their role as sensors and only after this as carriers (8.33 percent of the times).

(9) *The company has served* a court interdict on those protesters.
(2009 sub-corpus)

When employers and their organisation are on the passive side of the process,

they are mostly represented as receivers of verbal processes, as in example (10) below, (50 percent of the times).

(10) They just want to *talk to the owner*.

(2013 sub-corpus)

This is followed by their role as goals of material processes (44.44% of the times). Finally, employers and their organisations are rarely depicted as attributes (5.56 percent) and never as phenomena or verbiages.

As it could be expected, the most active represented participant in the notes is that of police and the state in general. Indeed, they are active participants 95.51 percent of the times. They are mostly the actors of material processes (54.12 percent, exemplified in extract (11) below) and sayers of verbal processes (40 percent), as in (12). Rarely (3.53 percent) are they represented as sensors or carriers (2.35 percent), while they are never existents nor behavers.

(11) Members of Modimolle POP unit *arrested* 7 Africans.

(my emphasis, 2012 sub-corpus)

(12) We *told* them the march is unlawful.

(my emphasis, 2006 sub-corpus)

Interestingly, the police or other representatives of the state have only one passive role. Indeed, their representation as receivers of a verbal process covers the entirety (100 percent) of their passive roles.

The study of intertextuality is applied at text level rather than clause level. The results show that 82.42 out of 100 notes have at least one form of intertextual reference. The most frequent type of intertextual reference is free indirect reporting, as in extract (13), (27.47 percent), followed at a very close distance by indirect reporting, as in (14), and narrative report of speech acts, exemplified in extract (15) below, both at 26.37 percent. The least used form of reporting is the direct one, as in (16) below which amounts to only 2.20 percent of the instances.

(13) Placards complaining about wage/salary dispute, demanding an increase of 20% on their salary.

(14) Suspects that the workers would be back to damage his property

(15) And Capt James spoke to shop stewards.

(16) Plugcards (sic) were carried and stated: "Down with the Red Allert Company".

(All from the 1997 sub-corpus)

When other voices are represented in the notes it is mostly the voice of workers (46.15 percent), followed by that of employers (29.67 percent) and that of the police (20.88 percent). There is also space for other voices that do not belong to any of the abovementioned categories (3.30 percent), these can be bystanders or people connected in one way or another with the incident. The voices represented in this way are mostly individual voices, individual workers or employers and police officers (54.95 percent of the times), but the content is also attributed in a substantial way to collective entities, such as the union, or the company (42.86 percent).

5. Discussion

The findings on the choice of language, which show a steady decline in the use of Afrikaans seem only partially justified by the changes in the composition of the discourse community that follow the initiatives of positive discrimination undertaken by the ANC governments over the years. Indeed, if in 1994 the percentage of white, mostly Afrikaner, officers was 45 percent (Bruce, 2013, p. 17), with a share in the general population of only 12.8 percent, in 2012 the percentage had drastically dropped to 12 percent, still more than the percentage in the general population that by that time had also dropped to 8.9 percent.³ During the years of police reform, white Afrikaner officers were offered very generous severance packages, especially for the higher ranks, so as to facilitate the appointment of black personnel at the higher ranks (Bruce, 2013, p. 18). Moreover, the decade between 2003 and 2012 saw a mass recruitment campaign in the SAPS and most of the new recruits came from the “previously disadvantaged groups”. This could explain the sudden prevalence of English registered by the data for those years. Indeed the total of the police service personnel grew by 65 percent; of these 79 percent came from the previously disadvantaged groups in general and by a percentage of 75 percent from black Africans (Bruce, 2013, p. 18).

Does this suffice to justify the change in the language used? The first issue that needs to be taken into account in order to answer this question is that, as anticipated in the procedure section above, South Africa’s Constitution recognises 11 official languages, which can be seen as equal candidates in any official text. Nonetheless, only the two “white” languages are represented in the corpus. If the prevalence of Afrikaans can be easily explained with the previous composition of the personnel, the same cannot be said for English, which with all probability was not the mother tongue of the new recruits. The prevalence of English can only be explained with the status of “liberation language” that English has managed to achieve in the years of the struggle against Apartheid, when it was the preferred tongue used to also communicate with the vast solidarity movement that had developed around the world, thus taking advantage of its status as a global language (Crystal,

2012). The episode of the 1976 Soweto uprising is telling in this regard. Indeed, the protest started as a reaction to compulsory education in Afrikaans in the schools of the black township in the outskirts of Johannesburg, and the request of the youth was that of having English instead as a main language for teaching. Nonetheless, not all black South Africans had English as their lingua franca to interact with their white employers, as this depended on the trade in which they were involved. Roughly, it can be said that black workers who were employed in the fields mostly had Afrikaner bosses and thus knew Afrikaans, while those employed in the mining or other industries used and knew English.

The idea of a magmatic discourse community caught in its dynamic phase is confirmed by the findings at the level of generic stages, as operationalised in the research concerning the point of departure of each notes section.

The decrease in the percentage of date and time at the beginning of each section seems to point towards a progressive uniformity of the genre in the direction of a rational and economic organisation of the text, thus creating the impression that a professional language is being developed albeit at a very slow pace.

From the point of view of the description of the genre, the prevalence of material processes of which the police is the main active participant, is particularly telling with regards to the purpose and the intended audience of the genre. Indeed, the reports are only meant for internal circulation and they serve to keep track of developing incidents.⁴ Nonetheless, we cannot rule out other types of public for the reports. Indeed, the documents will most certainly be used by the higher ranks in the police in order to evaluate the actions of the forces on the ground. This could also explain the choice of English above all other languages, as on the one hand white people are still over represented in the commanding echelons of the SAPS (Bruce, 2013, p. 19), and on the other black educated people who are more probably placed in high positions have English as their second (sometimes even first) language. Another possible public for the reports is that of journalists who follow the incidents. Indeed, it is possible that in order to avoid the uncontrolled flow of information the notes section also constitute the basis for any press release that the police might decide to make public.

From the ideational point of view, the representation of reality that we get from the analysis of the distribution of participants roles and their position seems to create very different positions for the three main social actors. Workers and their organisations are construed mostly as actors in material processes, which is quite unsurprising if we think that most of the times they initiate the incident by deciding, for example, to organise a picket at their places of work. Nonetheless, they are by far the only social actor that gets

defined by others through the use of relational clauses. The representation is very different from that of their counterpart, employers and their organisations who, apart from also being predominantly represented as actors, are nearly never defined by others. As far as the police and other state organisations are concerned, the fact that they are very rarely represented as passive participants does not come as a surprise as they are the authors of the texts. The police is represented as doing something or saying something most of the times, and its only passive role is that of being at the receiving side of a verbal process.

Leech and Short's classification of the different types of intertextual references (Leech & Short, 2007) are placed in a continuum from most visible authorial intervention (the narrative report of speech act) to the least visible authorial intervention (the direct report). The implications of the authorial choices in this system have been discussed by Fairclough (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 49–50). The different levels of authorial intervention suggest different orientations towards difference. Moreover, the relative power of the author, in this case the police, can be seen as decreasing as we move towards the bottom of the spectrum, as there is responsibility about the fidelity of the reported proposition when direct report is used. The results indicate that the preferred forms of intertextuality are the median ones: free indirect reporting and indirect reporting (together they account for 53 percent of the instances), thus suggesting an attempt by the SAPS to construe an unbiased, objective role in the dispute between the two voices that are mostly represented in the notes, namely that of the workers and that of the employers. Nonetheless a clear discrepancy can be found when we look at the two extreme positions. Indeed, the one indicating maximal authorial intervention is particularly prominent, if compared with direct reporting that is really marginal. All in all, we can conclude that we still have a very prominent role for the police service construed in the texts. The reason for this is to be found in the genre itself, its purpose and intended audience, which clearly shape the characteristics of the texts.

6. Conclusion

The study presents only preliminary findings of the research, but the data discussed above shows that we are actually looking at a discourse community in the making, which is slowly but surely shaping a peculiar genre that is important for the day-to-day work of the South African Police Service.

The analysis has started to shed some light on a part of the professional practice that only seldom makes it to public scrutiny, thus filling the gap highlighted in the introductory sections.

The linguistic data will be useful for a possible extension of research at an

international level and in a comparative key. A future analysis of this kind could fit into a line already present in the field of political science studies on the progressive militarization of law enforcement in Western democracies (Dixon, 2000; Vitale, 2005; Gordon, 2005; Fominaya & Wood, 2011; Springer, 2009; Porta & Tarrow, 2012; Seferiades & Johnston 2012; Woodall, 2013).

Notes:

1. The relevant processes in extracts 1 to 12 have been italicised by the author for emphasis.
2. A peculiar type of protest dance.
3. The source for statistical data is the national statistical service, Stats SA http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=3836.
4. For example, in order to inform the men and women of the new shift of what has been going on before their arrival on the scene.

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