

Branding in Higher Education: A Speech Act Theory Perspective on UK Universities

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European higher education has changed into an element of what has been termed ‘the stakeholder society’ (Maassen 2000), indicating the increasing role of stakeholders (internal and external) in the affairs of higher education institutions. Governments used to fulfil a monopolistic role *vis-à-vis* universities (Neave and Van Vught, 1991), but in recent decades in many countries market mechanisms have been introduced and the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions has increased (Estermann and Nokkola, 2009). Consequently, higher education institutions have to “serve and obey” different masters. The increasing role of the market has empowered certain stakeholders: students (and their parents) have gradually become critical consumers – particularly in the context of increasing fees – and employers and their organisations demand tailor-made responses to their request for a skilled labour force. Additionally, in the area of research, higher education institutions are expected to work more closely together with stakeholders in business and industry to be able to create ‘useful’ knowledge.

The changes described above, obviously taking place quite often gradually rather than overnight, have considerable implications for higher education institutions in contemporary society. The changing demands of stakeholders pose challenges regarding how higher education present themselves. We can assume that higher education institutions increasingly carefully consider what image (how would they like to be seen?) they share with the world outside. There is some research on e.g. mission statements (see Morphew and Hartley, 2006; James and Huisman, 2009). We have, however, limited insight in *what kind of* messages higher education institutions share with their stakeholders, and *how* they formulate these messages (but see Chapleo et al., 2011; Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013). The current paper explores the style of messages by looking at welcome addresses of UK universities.

Theory: University branding

Welcome addresses are conceived of as branding activities, part of the larger communication and branding strategies of higher education institutions. Branding is defined here as “*a multidimensional construct whereby managers augment [...] services with values [facilitating] the process by which [stakeholders] confidently recognize and appreciate these values*” (De Chernatony and Riley 1998: 427; in Chapleo 2007: 24). Such a definition of branding strongly relates to the concept of image management, where image is to be conceived of as “... something that a communicator creates – constructs and projects or gives to other people” (Grunig 1993: 126). It should be noted that an organisational brand of a higher education institution does not necessarily project its identity (or what the institution really is and stands for).

Existing studies on university branding provide insights into the content-related processes of university branding. At the same time, they neglect the role of the branding *style*, although there is some literature addressing university symbols (logos, crests) and straplines (see e.g. D’ Andrea, Stensaker and Allison, 2007). We argue that if branding is to be conceived of as a process of impression on and persuasion of stakeholders via argumentation, it is also of relevance to investigate

the style of university branding. A dedicated strand of literature – mostly rooted in linguistics and communication studies than in the branding and marketing literature – shows that processes of persuasion are influenced by the content of a message, but also by the style of argumentation (e.g. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Searle 1969, 1979; Walton, 1996).

In this paper, we draw on Speech Act Theory (Searle 1969, 1979) to investigate the style of higher education institutions' branding. Speech Act Theory is a theoretical framework in linguistics and pragmatics, distinguishing between types of speech acts which are utterances with a performative function (Searle, 1969, 1979). It argues that there are basically five types of speech acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. Assertives are utterances that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, hence asserting something (e.g. claiming, concluding, reporting). They express the speaker's believe. Directives are attempts to make the listener to perform an act. They express the speaker's desire, aimed to cause the listener to take a particular action (e.g. advising, commanding, requesting). Commissives are utterances that commit the speaker to perform a future action, hence they express the speaker's intention (e.g. promising, refusing, threatening). Expressives express the speaker's psychological state or emotions about the state of affairs presented in the utterance (e.g. apologizing, congratulating, thanking). Finally, declaratives bring about alteration in the status of the referred objects and change the reality in accordance with the proposition (e.g. baptisms, declaring war, pronouncing the listener guilty).

The aim of our research is to identify which speech acts – as signals of branding style – are used by universities and whether (and why) differences between types of universities could be detected. We develop hypotheses that predict differential uses of speech acts by type of higher education institution (age, status, university grouping). We also developed a few hypotheses regarding changes in the use of speech acts over time.

Method

We searched the Internet in 2005 and 2014 for welcome addresses of UK higher education institutions (using the UCAS and HEFCE web sites as points of departure) and found 45 and 50 welcome addresses, respectively. About 15 higher education institutions were included in both the 2005 and 2014 samples. The sentences/utterances in the addresses (around 700 in 2005, around 800 in 2014) were coded by both researchers individually. Notes were compared until consensus was reached.

Results

We have started coding the data and are not yet in the stage of presenting and analysing results. A preliminary (re-)analysis of the 2005 data confirm differences between types of higher education institutions, but not as clearly as the hypotheses predict.

Implications

The study, being one of the first on branding styles, will contribute to our conceptual understanding of the style of branding of higher education institutions. At this stage it is difficult to discuss practical implications. Our aim is to broaden the sample and look at branding styles in different cultural contexts. It would be interesting to explore differences between higher education systems or

differences between so-called world-class institutions and national/regional higher education institutions.

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